

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE



JANUARY 1982

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BEAUTIFUL BUT DEAD

by Brett Halliday

A crazed killer was on the loose, murdering and mutilating lovely contestants in the Miami Beach Miss Cosmos Beauty Pageant. Mike Shayne was called in on the case — which became even deadlier than anyone had suspected! 4

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The beautiful girl watched in horror as the killer's hand reached in his pocket and brought out a bottle. She saw the liquid coming at her face, felt it splash like liquid fire as it drenched her. And then came the pain, the awful burning pain....

Beautiful But Dead

by BRETT HALLIDAY

"ISN'T MIAMI BEACH BEAUTIFUL, WILMA?" Anne Fletcher asked.

"It certainly is, honey," Wilma Simpson answered. "Don't you think we'd better be getting back to the hotel, though? It's getting kind of late."

They made an unusual pair, these two women, one of them young and astoundingly beautiful, the other middle-aged and chunky but still very competent-looking. Male heads turned as they strolled down one of Miami Beach's wide boulevards. Anne Fletcher was worth turning to take a look at. She was tall and lushly-figured, with long blond hair, a dazzling smile, and stunning legs. She looked every inch a beauty queen.

And with any luck, she would be just that in approximately forty-eight hours.

Anne was a contestant in the first annual Miss Cosmos Beauty Pageant, which was being held in Miami Beach's luxurious new civic auditorium. As she walked down the sidewalk, pleasantly conscious of the admiring looks she was getting, Anne thought about how wonderful it would be when she was announced as the winner at the Saturday night finals. There was no doubt in her mind that the crown, and all that went with it, would belong to her before that night was over. She had felt the same confidence before each of the series of local and state pageants that had culminated in her being in Florida now. Nothing was going to dampen her spirits, not even the presence of dull, lumpy Wilma, one of the dull, lumpy chaperones that all the girls were stuck with.

"You don't want to be late getting back," Wilma went on. "You know that tonight's activities are important."

Repressing a snort of derision that would have been unladylike, Anne said, "It's just the preliminaries, Wilma. The only thing that's really important is Saturday night."

"You just go on thinking that if you like." Wilma shook her head. "You girls always think you've got the world on a string. You don't realize that it's hard work during the week that makes for a winner on Saturday night."

"Spare me the sermons, all right? I had a good time sightseeing today, I don't want it spoiled."

Anne turned her steps back toward the beachfront hotel where all the contestants were staying. The sun had dropped behind the horizon, and twilight was falling rapidly as Wilma hurried to catch up with her charge. The older woman muttered under her breath about long-legged youngsters who had all the energy in the world.

There were plenty of lights along the street, flickering on as darkness fell, but there were also some alleys that received little of the illumination. Anne's mind was only on the contest and the good fortune that would come her way after she had won it. There had been some problems, but she had taken care of them, she was sure of that. She didn't give the mouth of the alley she was passing a single glance.

Until the hand came out of the shadows and grabbed her arm.

ANNE FELT HERSELF JERKED ROUGHLY TO THE LEFT, into the dimness of the alley. She gasped, "Hey!" as the fingers dug cruelly into the soft flesh of her upper arm, which was bare in the sleeveless, lightweight dress she was wearing.

The person who had grabbed her was only a vague shape in the shadows, but Anne struck out anyway. Her blows found only empty air. She opened her mouth to scream for Wilma . . .

Fingers closed over her mouth, choking off the cry. Anne felt an arm wrapping around her neck. She tried to drag a breath into her lungs, but the air wasn't getting through. As she tore futilely at her attacker's hands, she saw strange lights dancing before her eyes.

Wilma had been about ten feet behind Anne when the contestant was pulled into the alley, and she charged forward immediately. She had been in the chaperone business a long time, and she knew trouble right away when she saw it. And whether or not she liked Anne personally, the girl was in her charge and had to be protected. Wilma ran into the alley, shouting, "Let her go! Let that girl go!"

The assailant suddenly flung Anne against the wall of a building,

making her head crack against the hard surface sharply. Anne moaned and started to slip down to the grimy floor of the alley. Wilma leaped toward the person who had grabbed her.

The chaperone ran into something.

It hurt, and as Wilma came to a stop, she put her hands to her middle where the thing had smashed into her. As she did, a pair of clenched fists came crashing down on her head, driving her to her knees. She felt sick from the blow in the stomach, and as she fell, she wondered why no one was coming to help them. A foot crashed into her side, knocking her over onto her back, and then a weight settled on top of her. Fingers locked around her throat and started to squeeze

Anne was sprawled next to the building, her head spinning crazily. She was aware for some reason that she was getting her dress dirty, here in the squalor of the alley, and it just didn't seem right, when only a few yards away were the glitter and glamor of Miami Beach.

But she didn't think about that anymore after the attacker got up from the still figure of Wilma and began walking toward her again.

Anne cringed back against the wall, wishing she could get up and run, but her legs didn't seem to want to work on their own. She whimpered wordlessly, trying to force some sort of plea for mercy and failing.

From somewhere out on the street, a stray beam of light lanced down the alley, and Anne saw who it was that was standing over her. She saw, and she knew who it was and why they were all here in this awful place, and still she couldn't scream or run or do anything to save her life. It was all so unfair, to lose it all now, after she had worked so hard, done so many things she really hadn't wanted to do, all in the quest for the title, the crown, the success that she wanted most in life.

The killer didn't say anything. Anne watched a hand reach in a pocket and pull out a tightly closed bottle. A shudder of horror went through her as the bottle was opened. She saw the liquid coming at her face as the hand holding the bottle flicked it at her, felt the splash like liquid fire as it drenched her.

And then the pain, the awful burning pain, made her pass out, and if her mind had not been pushed over the brink into madness by now, she would have been grateful for that.

This way, she didn't have to feel the fingers choking the life out of her

MICHAEL SHAYNE LEANED BACK IN HIS CHAIR, put his feet on the scarred surface of his old desk, and opened the newspaper he was reading. It was a morning edition of the *Miami Daily News*, and

Shayne was in the middle of an article by his old friend Timothy Rourke about a scandal in the local building industry. Shayne was glad that he had his office here in an older building on Flagler Street and his apartment in an older building on Second Avenue. They were both solid structures that would last at least as long as he would want to continue his career as a private investigator.

He could hear the sounds of typing coming from the outer office, as his lovely brown-haired secretary, Lucy Hamilton, kept up with the never-ending paperwork. The typing broke off abruptly, though, and a moment later, the door between the office opened and Lucy slipped through.

"We've got visitors, Michael," Lucy said softly. "Two men to see you. They said their names were Lester Ernwin and Wallace Jacobs."

Shayne took his feet off the desk, sat up, and folded the paper. "Did they say what they wanted, Angel?"

"No. Mr. Ernwin gave me his card, though."

Lucy handed over an embossed business card, and one of Shayne's shaggy red brows quirked upwards. He said, "Well, well. Why would the producer of a beauty pageant want to see me?"

"Maybe he wants you to be a judge," Lucy suggested.

A broad grin split Shayne's lean face. "I can't think of a nicer assignment. But the Miss Cosmos Pageant is tomorrow night; it's a little late to be picking judges." He shrugged. "Okay, send them in. We'll find out what it's all about."

Lucy ducked back out and ushered the two men into Shayne's private office a moment later. Lester Ernwin was several inches shorter than Shayne, with horn-rimmed glasses and graying hair, while Wallace Jacobs was much larger, as tall as Shayne and heavier, though some of his weight was running to fat. The men introduced themselves, shook hands with Shayne, and sat down across the desk from him.

Shayne lit a cigarette and blew smoke toward the ceiling. He asked, "What can I do for you gentlemen?"

Ernwin sat forward. "As you saw from my card, Mr. Shayne, I'm associated with the Miss Cosmos Beauty Pageant. I'm the executive in charge of it, in fact, and Mr. Jacobs is our head of security."

Shayne glanced over at Jacobs and wasn't surprised that the man was in the security field. He had the look of a well-fed ex-cop. Shayne went on, "What's the nature of the problem?"

"I didn't say there was a problem, Mr. Shayne," Ernwin replied.

"You wouldn't be here if there wasn't," Shayne declared. "I don't care much for fencing. Tell me what's wrong, and I'll tell you if I can do anything about it."

Jacobs said bluntly, "Murder is what's wrong. What can you do about that?"

Shayne kept his face impassive. "That depends on the murder." He looked down at the paper on his desk. "I didn't see anything about a murder in this morning's paper."

Ernwin sighed. "So far, we've been able to keep it quiet. Chief Painter and his men are cooperating with us, but I don't know how long that will last. After all, there were two deaths."

This time Shayne couldn't keep his surprise from showing. He said, "Two deaths? You'd better start from the beginning, Ernwin. Who were the victims?"

JACOBS REACHED INTO A POCKET and took out two photographs, which he handed across to Shayne as Ernwin said, "One of our contestants, a lovely girl named Anne Fletcher, and the chaperone who was assigned to her, Wilma Simpson. They were both strangled in an alley in Miami Beach last evening."

Shayne looked at the pictures, saw an exquisitely beautiful young girl in one of them and a pleasant-faced older woman in the other. He cast a hooded glance up at his two visitors. "Painter doesn't know yet who did it?"

"We don't know who or why or anything," Ernwin said, a tightness in his voice betraying the strain he was under. "It's all so terrible . . ."

"Homicide usually is." Shayne thought back over all the publicity he had seen for the Miss Cosmos Pageant during the last couple of weeks and said, "Not good for your pageant, either. What are you going to do about it?"

"We're going ahead with it. The runner-up from Miss Fletcher's state will take her place. I just hope we can keep everything from falling apart until after tomorrow night."

Shayne smoked in silence for a moment, then said, "I see why Painter is hushing things up for you. This contest must be bringing a lot of money into Miami Beach."

Jacobs looked daggers across the desk. "That's not it at all," the beefy security chief snapped. "But the women are dead, and there's nothing we can do to change that."

Shayne leaned back in his chair. "Why come to me?"

Ernwin answered firmly, "I want to hire you, Mr. Shayne. I fully appreciate everything Chief Painter has done so far, but I'd like for you to investigate, too. I'm not sure the police are going at things from the right angle."

"What's Painter's theory?"

"Their money and valuables were gone," Jacobs said. "The cops say it was a robbery, but we're not sure."

"We haven't told you the most awful thing yet," Ernwin added.

"And what's that?" Shayne asked.

"The killer . . . Whoever it was, they used acid on Anne."

Shayne felt a sudden surge of anger and sickness in his belly.

"They put acid on her face," Ernwin went on in a choked voice. "It was almost all burned off. I had to go to the morgue . . . That lovely body, and that awful face . . ."

Shayne stood up and stepped around the desk as Ernwin's self-control began to slip away. He clamped a hand on the man's shoulder and muttered, "Take it easy." Hard lines were etched on his face now.

"You see why we're upset," Jacobs said. "There's got to be more to this than just a mugging, Shayne. Some sort of nut, maybe. We want you to find whoever did it and make sure it doesn't happen again."

Ernwin looked up at Shayne, face pale. "Wallace tells me you're the best private detective in Miami, Mr. Shayne. Will you take the case?"

Shayne looked at the picture of Anne Fletcher lying on his desk. Next to it was the photograph of Wilma Simpson's kindly features. He was about to tell them he would be glad to take the case, when Ernwin reached in his pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. Shayne recognized it immediately as a check.

"Twenty-five thousand dollars as a retainer," Ernwin said. "Another twenty-five when you find the killer."

Shayne had to grin, despite the anger he still felt when he thought about someone killing the two women and then being sick enough to use acid to disfigure one of them. But it was a savage grin.

"You bet I'll take the case," he said shortly. "Try keeping me off it now."

II

ERNWIN AND JACOBS HAD TAKEN A CAB TO Shayne's office, so he gave them a ride in his Buick as he headed for the auditorium where the pageant was being held. The pageant offices were there, too, and Shayne thought that would be as good a place to start as any.

"Tell me about Anne Fletcher and Wilma Simpson," he said.

"There's not much to tell," Ernwin replied. "Anne was twenty years old, a lovely girl from a small town in the Mid-west. She had

been in several other pageants, though never on a national level before."

"You do background checks on the contestants, don't you?" Shayne asked.

"Of course. There was nothing in her background to indicate that anyone would want to kill her, if that's what you're getting at, Mr. Shayne."

"How about the chaperone?"

Jacobs supplied the answer to that question. "I knew Wilma. Nobody would ever want to hurt her. She was just a sweet lady, a widow, who liked working with these kids. She's been working as a pageant chaperone for years, on both the state and national levels, for all the big pageants."

Shayne took one of the causeways over Biscayne Bay to Miami Beach, and as he drove up the incline of the bridge, he reached up with one hand to tug at the lobe of his left ear. He said thoughtfully, "If not for the acid, I'd say it was a simple mugging that went too far. But I never heard of a mugger who carried acid. That sounds like some kind of psychotic to me. You said the chaperone wasn't burned, didn't you?"

"That's right. Just Anne Fletcher."

"There have been other cases where killers had grudges against attractive people. If that's what we've got here, it may not be easy catching the guy. I'll do what I can, though."

It didn't take long to reach the auditorium. Shayne parked in a reserved space that Ernwin pointed out, and the three of them walked quickly into a rear entrance of the big building. Shayne thought for a moment that he heard some sort of commotion around on the other side of the building, but then they were inside and the sound died out.

Ernwin led the way to a sumptuous office with dark wood on the walls and thick carpet on the floor. He gestured for Shayne to have a seat and said, "Just give me a few minutes and I'll have Faith Sadler join us. She's in charge of our chaperones. I'm sure that between the three of us, we can answer any questions you have, Mr. Shayne."

The pageant producer made a quick phone call, and a few moments later, the office door opened and a woman came in with a wan smile. Ernwin said, "Faith, this is Mr. Shayne. He's agreed to help look for the monster who killed poor Anne and Wilma."

Faith Sadler extended a cool hand to Shayne. She was a tall woman in her thirties, with a slender figure and dark blond hair, altogether quite attractive. She said, "I'm glad to meet you, Mr. Shayne. I hope you're able to help us."

"So do I," Shayne said.

Faith took a seat, joining Shayne and Jacobs in front of the desk. Ernwin started to say something, but before he could get the words out, a knock sounded on the door and it popped open.

A man stuck his head through the opening and said, "Am I interrupting anything? Looks like a meeting going on."

Ernwin shook his head. "Not at all, Allen. Come on in. I'm glad you found us, in fact, since we'll be discussing security again."

SHAYNE STUDIED THE NEWCOMER AS THE MAN CAME IN and drew up another chair. He was darkly handsome and looked vaguely familiar, though Shayne couldn't place him.

Ernwin took care of that. He said, "This is Allen Grant, our master of ceremonies, Mr. Shayne. Allen, this —"

"I know already, Mike Shayne," Grant cut in. "I've heard a lot about you since I moved down here last year, Mr. Shayne."

Shayne nodded a greeting to the man, remembering now why Allen Grant had looked familiar. He was an entertainer who had had a varied career, working as a song-and-dance man in nightclubs, an actor in some forgettable movies, and most recently, the host of a television game show. Shayne remembered the stories in the paper when Grant had moved to the Miami area.

"Mr. Shayne is going to investigate the tragedy last night," Ernwin was saying. "If you have any questions at all, Mr. Shayne, feel free to ask them."

"You bet," Grant added. "We all want that guy caught."

Shayne looked around at the four people. They were all giving him expectant looks, waiting for him to say something encouraging to them. Instead, he declared, "I don't know if I can do you a damn bit of good or not."

Ernwin frowned. "What are you talking about, Mr. Shayne? I thought you were eager to take this case."

"I am. But I want you to understand that a lot of murders go unsolved. If this is a case of a robbery that turned to murder, or of some lunatic out to destroy a woman's beauty, then I can't be of much help. The police have the manpower to crack those kinds of cases, if they get lucky. I don't. What I *can* do is look for yet another motive, something that's hidden a little deeper. To do that, I'm going to have to ask a lot of questions around here, questions that some people may not like."

"For instance?" Faith Sadler asked.

Shayne crossed his legs and took out a cigarette. Putting it between his lips, he said around it, "For instance, did Anne Fletcher have any

boyfriends involved with the pageant?"

Ernwin shook his head and looked to the others for their opinions. They all concurred with him. He said, "I think she was going with a boy back in her hometown."

Shayne nodded. "All right. What about girlfriends, then? And I don't mean the kind she'd get together with to chatter about boys and clothes."

Faith's features tightened somewhat as she said, "I don't think you have the right idea about the primary concerns of young women these days, Mr. Shayne, but I assure you anyway that there were no romantic involvements between Anne and any of the other contestants."

"What about the chaperone? Boyfriends? Girlfriends?"

Jacobs shook his head. "I told you I knew Wilma Simpson. She was a good, solid woman, Shayne, didn't really care about anything except her work. I can't see her getting involved in *anything* that would get her killed."

"Just being in the wrong place at the wrong time is enough," Shayne muttered. He shifted his gaze to Allen Grant. "How closely are you involved with the contestants, Grant?"

The emcee shrugged. "Not much, except during the competition itself, of course. The production numbers we'll be doing tomorrow night to fill up time for the tube are all staged by pros. The girls have a few things they'll be doing, at least the ones who don't make the semi-finals, but I'm not in any of those numbers, so they just rehearse with the choreographer."

"You wouldn't know anything about their personal lives, then?"

Grant smiled. "Listen, I'm not the type of guy who can be around a bunch of beautiful gals and not talk to them all I can. But as far as any of them taking me into their confidence about anything important" He shook his head.

"You don't really think the murders were caused by Anne's love life, do you, Mr. Shayne?" Faith asked.

Shayne looked at her intently and answered, "I don't know. But I'll poke around until I find out. The cops can cover the other ground, like I said. I have to look for something personal."

"Some sort of dirt, you mean," she said tartly.

"Murder usually grows pretty good in dirt," Shayne said with a grin, but his eyes were deadly serious.

Ernwin put in, "Like I said, you can ask us anything you want, Mr. Shayne, and I can provide you with our files on Anne Fletcher, as well as files on all the other girls. We do investigate them fairly thoroughly, to make sure they've committed no rules infractions that would dis-

qualify them, and you're welcome to all the information we have."

"Thanks," Shayne said. "You can have it sent over to my office, and I'll go through it as soon as I get a chance. Right now, I think I'd like to meet some of the other contestants, especially any of them who might have been friends with the Fletcher girl."

"Everyone is friendly at these pageants," Faith said.

Shayne doubted that. He had never seen a competition of any kind, let alone one between young females, that was all sweetness and light, no matter what kind of image the pageant promoters put out.

"What about added security measures to keep this from happening again?" Ernwin asked.

Shayne shot a glance at Jacobs, and the look in the man's eyes didn't escape him. Jacobs was in charge of security, and he wasn't overly happy with Ernwin bringing Shayne in on that part of the problem. Shayne said, "I'd be sure you've got plenty of guards around here and at the hotel where the contestants are staying."

"That's taken care of," Jacobs grunted. "Besides, it wasn't here or at the hotel that the murders took place. The Fletcher girl and Wilma were out seeing some of the sights. There was some free time for the contestants late yesterday afternoon. They were late getting back, and that's what got us started worrying."

"Who found the bodies?" Shayne asked.

"A sanitation truck driver."

"Their identification was gone, along with their money," Ernwin added. "But one of the policemen remembered seeing Anne's picture on the news, and he thought he recognized her in spite of the acid burns. So they called us for an identification." A shudder ran through him as he recalled that visit to the morgue again.

"I wouldn't let the girls go out with just the chaperones anymore," Shayne said. "In fact, I'd keep them as close to home as possible for the duration, either here or at the hotel, and keep them in a group while they're between places."

"We've thought of that already," Jacobs said. "I think we've got the bases covered, Shayne."

"Sounds like it," the big redhead admitted. He stood up. "I'll go talk to some of the girls now."

"They should all be in the auditorium now," Allen Grant said. "They were having a run-through a few minutes ago when I passed by."

Shayne had just taken a step toward the door when it opened. A small, nattily-dressed man with a thin moustache stepped through it and then stopped short at the sight of Shayne's rangy frame. His words

were heartfelt as he said, "Oh, no."

Shayne grinned at him. "Oh, yes, Petey. I'm in this case too now."

PETER PAINTER, CHIEF OF THE MIAMI BEACH POLICE FORCE, glared at Shayne for a long moment, then snapped his eyes over at Ernwin. He said, "What's the matter, Mr. Ernwin? Do you have so little confidence in my people that you have to go out and hire a sleazy shamus like Shayne?"

"I'd be careful who I'm calling sleazy, Painter," Shayne said in a quiet voice. There was no love lost between the two of them. Many of Shayne's successes had come at Painter's expense, and the big investigator was an extremely sore spot with the chief.

"I have hired Mr. Shayne, but I meant no disrespect to you or your force, Chief," Ernwin said quickly. "We just thought that a private detective —"

"Might be able to cut corners and find somebody to pin the blame on, whether it's the killer or not," Painter said. "I know all about how Shayne works; you don't have to tell me about him. I must say I'm disappointed, Mr. Ernwin."

Shayne said tightly, "Don't take it out on these people, Painter, just because you don't like me. I'll stay out of your way, and anything I turn up, I'll hand over to you. All right?"

"I don't believe a word of it," Painter snorted.

"Then don't," Shayne shrugged. "Keep on being your usual lovable self." He went out of the office and closed the door before Painter could say anything else.

Finding the auditorium and the large group of lovely young women wasn't hard. Shayne had to admit that the next hour, spent in the company of some of the prettiest girls he had seen in a long time, was enjoyable. Most of the girls were wearing shorts or leotards as they rehearsed their dance numbers, and Shayne had trouble keeping an admiring grin off his face constantly.

But as pleasant as the time spent questioning the contestants was, it was also wasted time.

Some of them had known Anne Fletcher better than others. All of them were very upset about the murders, but there was so much going on that they could forget about the tragedy momentarily while they were going about their business. None of them could tell Shayne anything about Anne or Wilma Simpson that suggested a motive for murder.

IT WAS LUNCHTIME WHEN SHAYNE FINISHED questioning the

girls, and since the front entrance of the auditorium was closer now, he went out through it, intending to circle back around the block to his car.

He stopped as he stepped out onto the sidewalk, and his eyebrows went up. After a moment, he shook his head slowly.

A dozen or so women were striding purposefully up and down the sidewalk, chanting and carrying garishly painted signs. The slogans on the signs were all against the beauty pageant, ranging from STOP THE PEEP SHOW! to WE'RE PEOPLE, NOT MEAT! There was a good-sized crowd watching the protestors, and a couple of bored-looking cops were watching the situation in case trouble developed.

Shayne started to step around the sign-carrying women when someone called his name. He looked over to see Tim Rourke coming down the sidewalk, moving like a disjointed scarecrow, as usual.

Rourke nodded toward the pickets as he came up to Shayne. "What do you think, Mike?" he asked. "Carl sent me down to see if there was a story in this."

Rourke obviously didn't know about the killings. Painter had to have the lid clamped on really tight. Shayne looked over his shoulder at the protesting women and said, "I don't know a thing about it, Tim. Why don't you talk to the ladies?"

The lanky reporter was craning his neck, reading the signs. "Well, I see they're not calling us male chauvinist pigs anymore. What are you doing down here, Mike? Don't tell me you've got a case involving a beauty pageant!"

"Okay, I won't tell you." Shayne waved a hand and started to walk on down the sidewalk.

Rourke grabbed his arm and stopped him. "Not so fast, boy. Tell your Uncle Tim all about it. I know, they called you in because they suspect some of the contestants are, shall we say, amending what God gave them, right?"

Shayne shook his head. "Look, Tim, hold off, all right? You know I always come to you first when I've got a story."

"Yeah, I guess so," Rourke admitted. "I can see where the pageant's got troubles, though, with these ladies out here. We got a press release from their organization. They claim that beauty contests are sexist and degrading to women, and they're committed to stopping them, starting with this one, any way they can."

"Do they include violence in that?" Shayne asked.

"Who knows? I want to interview some of them and find out just how strongly they feel about the whole situation."

"You do that, Tim," Shayne said. "And let me know what you find out."

Shayne started to leave again, but Rourke stopped him by asking, "Say, how do you think Lucy would do in one of these contests?"

"I guess that would depend on who the judge was," Shayne smiled.

III

SHAYNE HAD LUNCH, THEN SPENT MOST OF THE AFTERNOON putting out the word with his contacts on the street that he was interested in talking to anyone who knew anything about the killings. He didn't really expect to get any results, but he had learned over the years to attack every angle of a case that he could find. He also made some phone calls checking up on Wallace Jacobs. The company for which Jacobs worked was known to Shayne. They provided security for anyone who had the money to foot their bills, and they were expensive enough so that only top-level operations utilized their services. Shayne knew their reputation was good, and every call he made to check on them only confirmed what he had heard on the grapevine. Pageant security seemed to be in good hands with Jacobs looking after it.

Back in his office in the late afternoon, Shayne called Lucy in and asked her, "How would you like to go to a beauty pageant tonight, Angel?"

"The Miss Cosmos contest?"

"Right. I thought I'd better be in attendance, even though I haven't come up with a damn thing today."

Lucy frowned prettily. "I don't know, Michael. I'm not sure I like the idea of beauty pageants."

"Whatever you say, Angel. I just thought I'd take you along so that people could see what a real beauty looks like."

Lucy tried to look stern and said, "Michael Shayne, you're just full of Irish blarney, aren't you?" But it was a losing battle. She had to smile at him. "Oh, well. I suppose sometimes the corniest lines are the best ones."

WHAT SHAYNE HADN'T MENTIONED WAS THAT HE INTENDED to spend most of the evening backstage and in the wings, keeping an eye on things, even though Jacobs and his guards would be on hand as well. Lucy seemed not to mind, though, when he left her in a good seat in the audience and headed for the backstage area. He had told her all about the case, naturally, and she knew that he wanted her on hand to

help him watch over the competition. Shayne knew how sharp-eyed she was and had great respect for her brain, and if anything did happen, she might well spot something that he wouldn't be in a position to see.

He was making his way backstage, winding his way around the sets that would be used during the course of the evening in this final night of preliminaries, when he heard a female voice say, "Well, if it isn't Mike Shayne, the famous PI himself. 'What are you doing here, Shayne?'"

Shayne turned with a smile and saw the trim young woman with short, curly red hair striding toward him. She wasn't one of the contestants, though she was pretty enough to be one. She wore jeans and a brightly colored top and looked much too stunning to be a cop.

"Hello, Terry," Shayne said. "I'm here for the same reason you probably are. Business."

"And that business is murder, I'd bet," Detective Theresa Denton said. "The killings last night, right?"

"That's right," Shayne agreed. "Did Painter assign you to the case?"

"Right away. Don't you think it's a good idea? After all, I've got free run of backstage, especially the dressing rooms, being a woman. And I am the only woman on Chief Painter's homicide squad."

Shayne thought putting Terry Denton on the case was a smart move, which made it unexpected, coming from Painter. Terry was a good cop, and she and Shayne had worked together to crack a big case several months earlier. There had been some initial animosity between them, due to the fact that Terry was the niece of Captain Dolph Denton, who had been one of Shayne's chief adversaries when the big redhead was working in New Orleans years before. When they met, Terry was on loan to Painter from the New Orleans force for an undercover assignment and had decided to stay on in the beachfront city after Painter offered her a permanent spot in Homicide.

"I think it's a great idea," Shayne told her now. "As long as we stay out of each other's way."

"I'm here to protect the contestants and try to dig up something on the murds last night. How about you?"

"Same thing," Shayne admitted. "But I thought Painter was convinced last night's job was a mugging that got out of hand?"

"Maybe so, but he still doesn't want to take any chances. This pageant is important to Miami Beach, and anything that's important to Miami Beach means a lot to the chief, too."

Shayne thought about Painter's tendencies toward social climbing

and his concern with his status in the community, and he knew she was right about Painter. If this pageant, with all its money and TV exposure, got ruined, it would really put Painter in a bad light. No wonder the natty little man was so tense about the whole thing.

"We know what the chief thinks," Shayne said. "How about you, Terry? Do you have any theories about the killings?"

She frowned for a moment, then said, "I'm not sure. The victims were robbed, there's no doubt about that. But that business with the acid doesn't sound to me like something a mugger would do."

"Right," Shayne grunted. "Sounds more like some kind of psycho, doesn't it?"

Terry nodded. "That's what I think. And that's why I think whoever did it might strike again at the contestants. There's some real nuts in the world, Shayne."

"Don't I know it."

SHAYNE DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING ABOUT IT, but he wasn't sure that there wasn't more to it than either a mugging or a psycho on the loose. That was what his angle of investigation was about, in fact. If the killer was a lunatic, the cops would probably run him to earth sooner or later, though he might kill again first. If robbery had been the sole motive, the murderer might never be caught, at least not for this crime.

For tonight, though, Shayne knew there was little he could do except keep a close watch on things. If anything happened tonight, he wanted to be right on top of it.

Terry had been on her way to the dressing rooms, to check on the girls, and she continued on that mission after saying goodbye to Shayne. He grunted a goodbye and gave an appreciative glance at the twitch of her rump as she went on down the hallway, then went on across behind the stage, looking for Wallace Jacobs.

A uniformed guard, one of Jacobs' men, told Shayne where to find the security chief. Jacobs was in Ernwin's office, and the producer of the pageant was there, too.

Ernwin looked up from his desk, a weary expression on his face, and said, "Hello, Mr. Shayne. I hope you have some results to report to us."

"Only negative ones, I'm afraid," Shayne said, reversing a chair so that he could straddle it and then lighting a cigarette. "So far as any of the other contestants know, there was no reason for anyone to kill Anne Fletcher, and Wilma Simpson is just as clean. I put out the word on the street that I'm interested in talking to anyone who knows anything

about the murders, but that hasn't turned up a damn thing yet."

"What are you going to do now?" Jacobs asked.

Shayned took a puff on the cigarette and rubbed a thumbnail along the line of his jaw. He shook his head slowly. "I'm going to send some inquiries back to Anne Fletcher's home town, try to look into her past even further than your people did. I've got a feeling that's where the answer is. Unless this is a case of senseless killings, and then we're facing a hard, cold trail."

"Whatever we can do to help you, just ask," Ernwin assured him. "Money is no object."

Shayne wondered about that statement, but he didn't say anything. Ernwin seemed awfully concerned about the case, like he had a personal stake in it, besides a business one.

THE ACTIVITIES WERE ABOUT TO START, so Shayne left the office with Ernwin and Jacobs. For the next two and a half hours, he watched the goings on from various places around the auditorium, mostly from the wings, though he slipped out and spoke to Lucy a couple of times during breaks in the program. She was enjoying herself and had nothing out of the ordinary to report.

The contestants went through all phases of the contest preliminaries, though not all of them competed in everything. Some of them paraded in evening gowns, some in swim suits. They were all lovely, and Shayne enjoyed that part of the evening, but then it was time for the talent competition, and he had to listen to several selections of bad opera, some adequate piano playing, and a few torch songs and ballads that seemed out of place anywhere except a smoky bar. His favorite contestant was the one who did a stand-up comedy routine bordering on the bizarre, and he reflected that with material that original, she had no chance of winning.

The contest drew to a close for the night, and as the audience was filing out of the auditorium, Shayne again crossed behind the stage, dodging around the stagehands who were moving sets now. He had in mind finding Terry Denton, whom he hadn't seen since their conversation earlier, and asking her if she had seen anything unusual during the contest.

He was only halfway across the stage when he heard the commotion in the wings.

There was a short, muffled cry and the sound of hurried footsteps. Shayne picked up his pace, knowing that the noises had come from the area of the dressing rooms, and when a scream suddenly echoed through the backstage area, Shayne broke into a dead run.

He heard people calling out behind him, was vaguely aware of Ernwin and Jacobs calling his name. He glanced over his shoulder and saw the two men, joined by Allen Grant and Faith Sadler, trotting after him. That glance was all he spared them, then he was charging ahead again.

Rounding a corner into the hallway off of which the dressing rooms opened, Shayne threw on the brakes and stopped short. There was someone lying motionless on the floor of the hall. Someone with red hair, wearing jeans and a brightly colored top, a girl lovely enough to be one of the beauty contestants herself —

Terry Denton.

And the red of her hair was even more crimson with blood.

IV

SHAYNE ONLY STOPPED FOR A SECOND, then ran forward again. When he reached Terry, he knelt beside her and saw to his enormous relief that her chest was rising and falling rhythmically. He moved her hair aside gently; winced as he saw the gash that someone had opened up on her scalp.

Footsteps pounded up beside him. Lester Ernwin bent down, his face a shocked mask, and said, "My God, is she all right, Mr. Shayne?"

"She's alive," Shayne snapped. "Have you got a doctor here?"

"Yeah," Jacobs answered. "I'll go get him."

As the security chief turned and hurried away, Faith Sadler asked, "Is there anything I can do to help, Mr. Shayne?" Allen Grant echoed her concern.

Shayne shook his red head. His features were gaunt and grim. "We'd better wait for the doctor."

That wasn't necessary, though. A second later, Terry let out a low moan and started to stir slightly.

Shayne put his hands on her shoulders and said, "Take it easy, Terry. It's me, Shayne. Somebody clouted you on the head and opened up a cut, so you just lie still."

Her eyes fluttered open, and she looked up at Shayne first in confusion, then in anger and frustration. She said shakily, "Mike . . . Somebody hit me . . ."

"I always said you were a hell of a detective." Shayne grinned wryly down at her, hoping to relax her until the doctor arrived.

She tried to get up, pressing feebly at his hands for a second before she gave it up. She said, "Got to help . . . Saw a girl, one of the con-

testants . . . going outside . . ." A trembling finger pointed. "Down there."

Shayne's eyes followed her gesture and saw the door down the hall. He didn't know where it led, but it was open a few inches, and he suddenly remembered the scream he had heard, the sound that had drawn everyone else. He asked Terry sharply, "Did you let out a scream a minute ago?"

"Didn't . . . didn't have time to scream. I saw the girl slip outside, started to follow her . . . Then I got hit. Last thing I remember for a little bit, getting hit . . ."

Shayne said to Faith and Grant and Ernwin, "Make her stay still until the doctor gets her." Then he was up and moving down the hall again, his hand going under his coat and his fingers wrapping around the butt of his pistol in its shoulder holster.

The slightly open door loomed in front of him, beckoning him on. It was a heavy metal door, with a push bar across the middle of it, and Shayne knew that it probably led outside. As he reached it and paused for a moment, he peered through the opening intently, but it was too shadowy for him to make anything out.

The others were keeping Terry still, as he had ordered, but they were also watching him curiously. He heard a muffled gasp, probably from Faith Sadler, as he took his gun out and held it ready. Shayne put his free hand on the door and shoved it open roughly.

Nothing happened. Light from the hall spilled out through the door, and Shayne could tell now that it led out into a service alley at the rear of the auditorium. He moved through the opening quickly, not wanting to be spotlighted against the light in the hall, and swept the gun from side to side, trying to cover all the alley.

There was no threat in the alley now. Only a dark shape sprawled on the concrete several yards away . . .

Shayne walked over to it, his eyes adjusting to the dimness of the alley, and even though he wasn't surprised when he saw what the shape was, he still couldn't restrain the curse that sprang to his lips.

THE GIRL WAS YOUNG AND BEAUTIFUL AND DEAD. Her face was contorted in pain and rage at the thing that had overtaken her, and that, as well as the disheveled state of her clothes, told Shayne that she had struggled. So far as he could see, there were no wounds on her, but he could already make out the swelling and discoloration of her neck.

Strangled, just like the other two. There was no acid this time, but that could have been because the killer didn't have time for it. There

was no doubt in Shayne's mind that whoever had done this was the same one who had knocked Terry out.

But why had the dead girl been foolish enough to come out into the alley in the first place? And why hadn't there been a guard on that door?

Shayne wanted answers to those questions, but right now, now that it was too late to help the murdered girl, what he wanted to do first was to check on Terry's condition again. He stood up and started to call out to Ernwin or Jacobs, if he had returned, to come out and keep a watch over the body until the police got there.

That was when the movement down the alley caught Shayne's eye.

It was just a quick flash of motion, a momentary shifting of the shadows, but it was enough. Shayne called, "Hey! You down there! Hold it!"

Again the flash of movement came, and this time there was the sound of frantic, running footsteps along with it.

Shayne snapped his gun up and started to squeeze off a shot, then thought better of it. He didn't know who it was who was running away down the alley, and in this light, shooting to wound was too chancy a proposition. Shayne jammed his gun back in its holster and took off after his quarry.

It was a man that he was chasing, Shayne could tell that much even in the shadows. He poured on the speed, his long legs carrying him down the alley like a linebacker chasing the ball carrier. Shayne saw the man he was chasing run past a cluster of garbage cans, then stop suddenly.

The man paused only long enough to topple several of the cans and send them rolling toward Shayne with some well-placed kicks. Shayne barked, "Dammit!", gritted his teeth, and hurdled the first one.

The cans clattered and banged around him as he plunged through the makeshift obstacle course, leaping over some of the cans and kicking the others out of his way. They didn't stop him, but they slowed him down enough so that the fleeing man opened up more of a lead on him.

They were closer to the street now, and Shayne could tell that the man had fair hair and was wearing some sort of coveralls. Despite the slowdown with the garbage cans, Shayne was gaining on him, and just as they reached the mouth of the alley, the big detective launched himself in a flying tackle.

His long arms caught the coveralls, wrapping themselves around the man and knocking him down. They both fell heavily, and the breath went whooshing out of Shayne's lungs as he hit the sidewalk. The

angle was bad, but he sent a punch at the man's head anyway. It failed to connect as the man twisted frantically away.

Shayne rolled away and came up ready to pitch himself back into the fracas. As the man came to his feet, Shayne lunged at him.

The man clutched frenziedly at something in his pocket. Shayne tried to stop his lunge in mid-air, but he had committed to it. He jerked his head to the side desperately, figuring that the man was pulling a gun.

Instead, something hard and metallic slammed into his temple, sending him slumping to the sidewalk. The object clattered as it fell in front of him, knocked out of the man's hand by the force of the blow. Shayne's vision was blurred by the impact, but he recognized it as a large screwdriver. He knew it could have been fatal had he not turned the blow into a glancing one.

Shayne's hands caught himself on the concrete and then reached out to clutch at the legs of the man. A foot crashed into his side, knocking him over. The man was panting heavily, and fighting with an almost maniacal strength.

Which didn't surprise Shayne a bit. A man would have to be a maniac to strangle three people as this one had done.

SHAYNE TRIED TO GET TO HIS FEET, didn't quite make it. His head was still spinning from the blow with the screwdriver. He heard the rapid slap of feet as the man ran away again. Shayne's fingers found his gun, pulled it out. He forced his eyes to focus long enough to line up his target.

Once, twice, three times, he squeezed the trigger. The fleeing man staggered to the side but kept running. He turned a corner as Shayne came up on his knees, and then he was gone.

Someone was calling Shayne's name. He looked over his shoulder as he struggled to his feet and saw Jacobs and Grant running toward him. When they got there, the entertainer was too out of breath to do anything except gasp for breath, but Jacobs snapped, "Did you see him?"

"I saw him," Shayne said, rubbing gingerly at the spot on his head that was throbbing with pain. "I got a good look at him just before he clobbered me with a screwdriver." He pointed to the tool lying on the sidewalk. "That's it there. It'll have his prints all over it."

"What . . . what did he . . . look like?" Grant asked between pants.

"About thirty," Shayne said. "Medium height and build, blond hair, wearing blue coveralls."

"Blue coveralls?" Jacobs demanded, looking surprised. "That means he was one of the people who work in the auditorium. That's the

outfit all the crew wear."

Shayne had already realized that, having seen plenty of the stage-hands and technical people wearing the same outfits earlier. He said, "That ought to narrow it down, then. Let's go see if we can find out who it was."

THE FIRST THING HE DID ON RE-ENTERING the auditorium, though, was to head backstage to see how Terry Denton was doing. He found her lying on a sofa in Ernwin's office, an efficient-looking man bending over her putting a bandage on the cut on her head.

She sat up suddenly when Shayne came into the office, disregarding the look that the man, who was obviously the doctor, gave her. Before Shayne could even ask about her condition, she said, "What happened, Shayne? What did you find out there?"

Shayne glanced around the office. Ernwin was there, of course, and so was Faith. Grant and Jacobs had followed him in. Jacobs and Grant already knew what was in the alley, since they had gone out that way, too, but Ernwin and Faith might not know about the dead girl yet. They would have to know sooner or later, though.

"There's been another murder," he said flatly. "I found the girl you saw going outside strangled, just like the other two. There was a man hiding down the alley, and when he ran, I chased him. He got away, but I got a good look at him."

Ernwin and Faith had both turned pale at the mention of another murder. Terry only closed her eyes and sighed. Shayne knew how she felt. Both of them had been there to help protect the girls, but there had been another killing regardless.

"You can describe the killer, then?" Ernwin asked.

"I can sure pick out the guy who hit me with this," Shayne said, taking the screwdriver, wrapped in a handkerchief now, out of his pocket. He repeated the man's description quickly.

Ernwin frowned and said, "That sounds just like John Bradbury, one of the lighting technicians. I can get his picture from the personnel people for the auditorium."

"You do that," Shayne said. "And call the cops while you're at it. I don't think Detective Denton here is in any shape to handle this particular investigation."

"The hell I'm not," Terry said sharply. She stood up and held out her hand. "I'll take that piece of evidence you've got, Shayne."

Shayne shot a glance at the doctor. The man lifted his shoulders in an eloquent shrug and said, "I closed up the cut with a couple of stitches. There's always the possibility of concussion, of course.

I'd advise that the young lady go to the hospital for observation."

"The young lady's got a job to do," Terry snapped. "Hand it over, Shayne."

Shayne knew when he was licked. He gave Terry the screwdriver.

Fifteen minutes later, the identification was next thing to positive. Ernwin had come up with a picture of John Bradbury, the lighting technician, and Shayne had said after one look, "That's the guy." His personnel record indicated that he had been in the Army, so a fingerprint check would be just a matter of routine now.

"I think we can issue a warrant on the strength of this," Chief Peter Painter said. He had arrived with the other officials summoned. The lab crews were going over the body and the murder scene, and Ernwin's office was nearly full now.

"Give me Bradbury's address, and I'll go pick him up," Terry said. "If he hasn't already taken off on the run, that is."

"The doctor said you should go to the hospital," Shayne reminded her.

"Someone else can make the arrest for you, Detective," Painter told Terry sternly.

She shrugged. "All right, Chief, if you want to go along with what Shayne here says"

Painter's eyes snapped over to Shayne and saw the grin forming involuntarily.

Two minutes later, Terry and Shayne were heading out of the auditorium. Shayne was saying, "That was a damn dirty trick, using psychology on a guy like Painter." And Terry was saying at the same time, "I keep telling you, shamus, I don't need any help making this collar!"

They both piled into Shayne's Buick, still bickering, and headed for John Bradbury's apartment.

V

BRADBURY LIVED NEAR BISCAYNE BAY, on the other side of the island city, and it took Shayne and Terry a little over fifteen minutes to reach the neighborhood. Shayne wasn't sure that it wasn't already too late to nab him. He had probably taken off just as quickly as possible after the run-in behind the auditorium in the alley. The lighting technician might not have even gone back to his apartment.

But that was the best place to start. Painter would be putting out an APB on the man right now, and he would have a back-up team on the way to Bradbury's apartment, too, to assist Terry in the arrest. Shayne

knew that he was just along for the ride, but it seemed fair enough for him to be there, since he was the one who had identified Bradbury.

He eased the Buick over to the curb down the block from where Bradbury lived. The apartment house they were looking for was an older one, its walls covered with creeping vines, its balconies bordered with fancy wrought iron. The place had seen its best days, though, Shayne saw when he looked closer.

There were a few dim lamps scattered through the courtyard in the middle of the complex. Shayne and Terry got out of the car and walked quickly but quietly into the courtyard and started looking at the arrangement of apartment numbers. Bradbury's was on the second floor and down at the other end of the building, Shayne guessed. He started up the stairs to the balcony, only to have Terry slip past him lithely and take the lead. Shayne raised an eyebrow and fell in step behind her, reaching inside his coat to loosen his gun in its holster.

They were halfway up the shadowy stairs when they both heard the quick footsteps rattling on the balcony. Terry jerked her pistol out of her purse and took the last few steps in two bounds. With Shayne charging up right behind her, she went down into a crouch, leveled the pistol in both hands, firing range style, and called out, "Hold it, mister!"

Shayne saw the figure of a man on the balcony, a man who had been coming toward the stairs but had stopped short when he saw them coming up. He had some sort of bundle in his hand, after a split-second of frozen reaction, he spun and ran the other way.

Terry's finger was beginning to squeeze the trigger when Shayne's hand came down on her gun and stopped her. "Wait a minute," Shayne barked. "There's no stairs down at that end of the balcony."

He was past her then, running down the balcony, past the darkened apartments, as the man with the bundle scurried away from him. Shayne swept out an arm, pointing, and rapped to Terry, "Cover downstairs, in case he jumps!"

That had to be what the man had in mind. There was no other way out at that end of the balcony. Terry whirled and hurried back down the stairs, then started running for the other end of the complex.

Shayne could see his quarry's blond hair now and knew it had to be Bradbury. A cold, angry fire was burning inside him. This guy had choked three women to death. And earlier tonight, he had come close to bashing out the brains of a certain red-headed private investigator. Shayne was good and mad, all right.

Bradbury came up short at the railing that marked the end of the balcony. His head jerked from side to side wildly as he looked for a way

out where there was none. Shayne was only a few yards away now.

With a strangled cry of despair, Bradbury heaved the bundle in his hands at the charging Shayne. Shayne flung up an arm to ward it off and slowed momentarily to keep from losing his balance in his headlong plunge. It was only a second's delay, but that was long enough for Bradbury to grab something from the pocket of his coveralls.

It wasn't a screwdriver this time. Shayne threw himself to the side as he saw the glint of a streetlight off metal. The gun in Bradbury's hand blasted.

There was a hard puff of wind right beside Shayne's ear, and then the slug was whining off into the night, ricocheting from something behind him. Shayne went into a rolling dive, grabbing for his own gun as he went down.

Bradbury pulled the trigger as fast as he could, sending a torrent of slugs racketing around the narrow balcony. Shayne heard Terry scream his name over the roar of the gun. He came up in a crouch, squeezing off a couple of shots of his own as he did.

But Bradbury's gun was silent now, and Shayne's bullets cut through empty air. The man had flipped over the railing while Shayne dove for cover, and now as Shayne lunged to the railing, he saw Bradbury running for his life into the night. Terry was firing now, and her bullets ripped into the turf behind the fleeing man, not quite catching up to him.

Shayne put a hand on the railing and vaulted it, dropping the eight or nine feet to the ground heavily. Terry ran up beside him.

"Are you all right, Mike?" she asked anxiously.

"Fine," Shayne grunted. "He just made a lot of racket and didn't do any damage. Did you see which way he went?"

Terry shook her head disgustedly. "I lost him in the shadows. Do we chase him?"

Shayne heard the sound of brakes from the street and looked over his shoulder to see the flashing lights of several police cars pulling up. He shook his head and said, "Painter's boys can do a house-to-house better than we can. Looks like we may have lost him again, Red."

Terry sighed. "Do you like it when people call you Red? Dammit, Shayne, what is it with this guy? We've had him in our hands a couple of times now and haven't been able to nab him. How many more girls is he going to have to kill before we stop him?"

Shayne's voice was as bleak as his face as he said, "I don't know, Terry. I just don't know."

THE SEARCH OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD BY THE POLICE turned

up nothing. Shayne had been afraid of that. This John Bradbury seemed to be leading a charmed life. It couldn't last, though. He would make a fatal slip sooner or later. Shayne just hoped it was sooner, for the sake of the potential victims.

As he and Terry strode back into Ernwin's office at the auditorium, the first thing they saw was the livid face of Peter Painter, who barked at Terry, "What's the idea of trying to make a solo arrest like that, Detective? Don't you know any better than to —"

Shayne took hold of his arm. Not roughly, but with such strength that Painter immediately fell silent. Quietly, Shayne said, "You knew we were going out there to arrest Bradbury, Painter. If you had any objections, you should have said something before we left. Now, if you want to chew somebody's butt over it, I can arrange it where you can reach your own."

Painter turned white with rage. Shayne released his arm and stood there calmly, waiting for Painter to make the next move. After a long moment of tense silence, Painter turned away and said, "We'll be in touch, Mr. Ernwin. Now that we know who the killer is, I don't think you'll have to worry about any more trouble. He'll be too afraid to come near your pageant again."

"I certainly hope so," Ernwin said. "Let me know if there's anything I can do, Chief."

"Of course, Let's go, Denton."

Terry gave Shayne a look as she followed Painter out of the room, a look that said she was grateful to him for sticking up for her and angry at him at the same time for not letting her defend herself. Shayne grinned tiredly at her and flipped her a goodbye salute.

Then he turned to Ernwin as the door shut and said angrily, "What the hell is this? You're going on with the pageant?"

Ernwin swallowed and toyed with a pen on his desk. He said, "Chief Painter seems to think it will be safe enough for the girls now. I can't imagine Bradbury trying to cause us any further trouble."

"And Painter may well be right for a change. But good lord, man, you've had three murders connected with this stupid contest. You can't be serious about going on with it."

Ernwin put the pen down and gathered his strength to reply to Shayne's angry words. He said emphatically, "I am very serious, Mr. Shayne. The sponsors of the pageant are very serious. A great deal of money has been spent to launch the Miss Cosmos Pageant, and a great deal more money is at stake. We're all ready to have network television coverage tomorrow night, and I for one am not going to let some lunatic ruin that!"

Shayne's teeth were on edge. He said slowly, "And to hell with any risk the contestants might have to endure, is that it?"

Ernwin slapped a palm on the desk, showing more fire than Shayne had ever seen him demonstrate before. "The police will catch Bradbury now that they know who he is. There will be no more risk."

"If you feel like that, you can dispense with my services then, I guess."

Ernwin put a hand to his face and rubbed it tiredly. "Forgive me, Mr. Shayne. I'm sure I didn't mean to sound so hostile. It's just all this strain we've all been under the last twenty-four hours . . . Please. I would like for you to stay on the case until the pageant is over."

"Why? The murderer has been identified."

"Peace of mind, Mr. Shayne. Between the police, and Wallace Jacobs and his people, and yourself, I believe we will be prepared for any contingency. Please stay on the case."

Shayne thought about the way Bradbury had slipped through his fingers twice and knew that there was no way he could abandon the case while there was still a chance for him to have a hand in the man's capture. He said grudgingly, "All right. I'll stay on until everything's over tomorrow night. As long as Painter hasn't found Bradbury by then, that is. If he has, then you won't need me for sure."

"If that's the case, you can be our guest in the audience tomorrow night. I could even have Allen introduce you on television . . ."

"I'll pass," Shayne grunted. "One more thing is bothering me. How the hell can you have a fair contest now, with two of the contestants dead? You going to have the runner-up take the place of the girl killed tonight?"

"Exactly. Her name was Mary Sue Hutchins. Lovely girl. Of course, they all are in a situation like this. To answer your question about fairness, though. I don't think you understand about pageants like this, Mr. Shayne. It doesn't matter who wins, not in the slightest."

"It doesn't?"

Ernwin shook his head. "Not at all. No, the police will keep tonight's killing quiet until after tomorrow night or until Bradbury is caught. The girls won't say anything about it to the press. They won't want to lose their chance to win. So things will go on as normal, and all across the country, people will turn on their television sets and watch our pageant, for whatever their reasons. And the sponsors will be happy, the network will be happy, everyone will be happy."

Shayne nodded, understanding now, all too well. "Yeah, everybody will be happy. Except three people who had the bad taste to go and get murdered."

SHAYNE USED ERNWIN'S PHONE TO CALL LUCY before leaving the auditorium. When she answered, he said, "It's me, Angel. I guess you got home all right?"

"Of course, Michael. I knew there was some sort of trouble backstage right after the contest was over for the night, so I assumed you were mixed up in it and would be busy. What happened? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. But there was another murder tonight."

"Oh, no. Who was it, Michael?"

Shayne glanced at Ernwin, who was making a point of trying to look like he wasn't paying any attention to the conversation. "One of the contestants again," he said. "A girl named Mary Sue Hutchins. She was strangled like the others, but the killer didn't have a chance to use acid on her. I nearly caught him a couple of times, but at least we know who he is now, a light man who worked here at the auditorium. Has to be a nut case."

"Are they calling the pageant off?" Lucy asked.

Again Shayne looked at Ernwin and felt a little disgusted by the attitude that the man had exhibited earlier. "You've got to be kidding," he snorted. "Not so long as there's some money to be made."

Ernwin's mouth tightened.

"I'm heading home now," Shayne went on. "Painter's men are out looking for the killer, so there's nothing else I can do around here tonight. Sorry you had to get home on your own, Angel."

"Don't worry about that, Michael. You just go on home and get some rest. You sound like you've had a rough night."

Shayne had to agree with that. He said his goodbyes and hung up. Ernwin looked up and said, "We'll see you tomorrow, Mr. Shayne?"

"I'll be around," Shayne said, then left the office gratefully.

It would feel good to get back to his own apartment. A full tumbler of Martell and a shower might make things look a little better.

HE FOUND HIMSELF FROWNING AS HE DROVE BACK across the bay to Miami. He had to be slipping, to have a killer in his grasp twice in one night and let him get away both times. Worrying about it wasn't going to change anything, though, he told himself firmly.

He was still thinking about that Martell as he unlocked the door of his apartment ten minutes later and stepped through it into the darkness of its interior.

His hand stopped before it reached the light switch.

There was something in the air that shouldn't have been there — the odor of a heady perfume. And the scent wasn't Lucy Hamilton's.

Shayne's foot moved behind him and kicked the door closed. He took a quick step to the side, reaching for his gun. Before he could grasp it, a woman's voice cracked through the room.

"Leave your gun alone, Mr. Shayne," it commanded. "I'll shoot if I have to."

There was a quick patter of footsteps beside him, and something hard and round pressed itself into Shayne's spine. He knew that the woman must have been waiting in the dimness long enough so that her eyes were adjusted to it.

"Just stand still," she breathed. "I don't want to hurt you."

"Well, we're in agreement on that," Shayne said. "What can I do for you?"

She sounded young, with a soft, lilting voice, and her perfume was even more appealing at close range. But there wasn't even a hint of romance in the air as she said, "You can tell me what connection you have with that goddamn so-called beauty pageant."

Shayne frowned, both at what she had said and the way she was grinding the gun barrel in his back. But was it a gun barrel, he suddenly wondered. Something about it didn't feel right, and he had had someone jab a gun in his back a hell of a lot more times than once.

"Maybe I just like beautiful girls," he said, stalling.

The answer got him an even sharper dig in the spine. His words must have hit some sort of nerve. It didn't matter, though. The more he felt the thing in his back, the more convinced he was that it wasn't a gun.

"I'm not here to listen to some man being funny and condescending," the woman grated. "Are you going to tell me what you were doing at that farce today, or . . . ?"

"Or what?" Shayne demanded, his voice hard now. "Or you'll shoot me? With what?"

"With —"

Shayne didn't let her finish. He spun around abruptly, his hand chopping down and knocking the thing in her hand loose. It fell to the floor. Shayne gave the woman a push to move her away from it and bent over, scooping it up.

"With this?" he asked. It was a fat cylinder, resembling a pen, but he knew what it was. It fired a charge of Mace and was very effective at close range . . . as long as the user didn't try to pass it off as a gun.

He saw the woman make a move for the door, but he was there before her, slapping a big palm against it and holding it shut, while he

reached out with his other hand and flicked the overhead light on.

The woman flinched away from the sudden light. Shayne took hold of her arm in case she tried to run again and propelled her across the room. Reaching the sofa, he gave her a push that made her sit down abruptly.

She was young, as he had suspected. Blond hair was pulled back from her face severely, but that didn't alter the fine lines of her features. She was wearing a very simple pants outfit, and Shayne couldn't shake the feeling that he had seen her somewhere before.

"Now," he said, "you'd better tell me what you're doing here playing tough."

"I told you," she all but spat at him. "I want to know why the Miss Cosmos Pageant needs the services of a private eye."

"And what business is that of yours?"

"Anything to do with that degrading spectacle is my business. It's any woman's business, when women are being exploited."

Shayne knew then where he had seen her. The last time she had crossed his line of sight, she had been carrying a picket sign and chanting about how awful beauty pageants were.

"Did you decide picketing wasn't good enough?" Shayne asked her. "So you've taken up breaking and entering instead?"

"Whatever it takes!" she flared at him. "I knew when I saw you outside the auditorium this morning and then saw you there again tonight that something was going on. What's wrong, detective? Has there been some trouble at the pageant that needs covering up? Surely there's nothing wrong in such a wholesome American paradise?"

Shayne hoped that she didn't see the wince that went across his face. She was probably closer to the truth than she realized, and Shayne didn't feel too proud of his part in the proceedings. He had taken on a straightforward job of finding a killer, not knowing that it would turn into a cover-up and a public relations crisis.

"My business is just that — my business," he said flatly. "But suppose you did get some information about a problem within the pageant. What would you do with it?"

"Run to the news media just as fast as I could," the young woman declared. "Use it to stop the pageant and ruin those bastards who are putting it on, I hope. It's time someone stopped that sexist exploitation!"

"I think your rhetoric's been done before," Shayne said dryly. "And whether or not I agree with you about your cause, I still don't like anybody coming into my apartment and trying to act tough with me."

Give me one good reason why I shouldn't call the cops and turn you in."

"You do what you feel like you have to, Shayne. You do whatever it takes to satisfy that male ego of yours."

For a moment, Shayne's face turned grim, and his mouth was a thin line as he said, "Listen, I don't give a damn what sex you are. I don't like anybody trying to get tough with me." He took a deep breath to get his anger under control, then went on, "Besides, you're a fine one to be talking about my male ego. I don't even know your name."

"It's not important."

"It is if I'm not going to call the cops."

She looked at him angrily for moment, then sighed and said, "I don't want to go to jail. It's Victoria Mills."

"All right, Ms. Mills." Shayne tossed the Mace pen back to her, and though the action surprised her, she caught it. "You can get out of here now, and I won't call the cops. But don't ever try a stupid stunt like that again. People have gotten shot sneaking around this apartment before."

Victoria Mills stood up and headed for the door hurriedly, evidently surprised that Shayne wasn't going to report her. She paused before going out and looked back at him.

"Don't think this changes anything," she said. "We're united, and we won't stop until we've gotten some changes made. This pageant is just the beginning, and we'll do anything to get our point across to people like you, Mr. Shayne. Anything, do you understand?"

Shayne made no reply, just stared at her with a hard look on his face until she slipped out the door and closed it behind her. Then he took a deep, weary breath and headed for the liquor cabinet on the far wall.

THE COGNAC AND THE SHOWER WORKED WONDERS, as Shayne had suspected they would. After downing some of the smooth liquor and then standing under a hard spray for long minutes, he felt much better, both physically and mentally.

Towelling himself dry, he sprawled out on the bed and pulled the telephone on the nightstand closer. He dialed a number quickly, then said when it was answered, "Sorry if I woke you, Terry. How are you feeling?"

Terry Denton's voice came back at him. "You didn't wake me up, Shayne. I took some pills the doctor gave me, but they're not working yet. Feel okay, I guess, but I've got a doozy of a headache."

"I imagine, after getting knocked out the way you did. Bradbury probably hit you with the same screwdriver he used on me."

"I don't think so," Terry said. "I just talked to the lab on the phone a while ago, and they said there was no blood on the screwdriver. There was some red hair, but it was so coarse that they suspect it was male."

Shayne grinned. "It was. He caught me with it hard enough to take some hair traces with it. Anybody's prints on it except Bradbury's?"

"None that amounted to anything." There was an undercurrent of something like uneasiness in Terry's voice. After a moment's hesitation, she went on, "There's something bothering me, Mike. I talked to the officers who searched Bradbury's apartment, too. They said there was absolutely nothing out of the ordinary there. No clue at all that he was a psychopathic killer."

Shayne sat up in bed, rubbing at his jaw with his free hand as he thought. "Maniacs usually leave some sign of their madness," he said. "Bradbury must have really covered his well."

"Maybe . . . And maybe we've overlooked something."

Shayne got a cigarette from the nightstand and put it in his mouth, saying around it, "No, we didn't. We've just been too busy to slow down and put it into words. You're asking what if Bradbury isn't our murderer, after all."

"Exactly. We just assumed that because he was out there in the alley with the body, he had killed the girl. And that's not necessarily the case."

"He could have been out in the alley for legitimate reasons," Shayne agreed. "I'm sure that's possible."

"But then why run from you? Why did he try to run and then attack us at his apartment house?" Terry asked.

"He was afraid," Shayne replied. "Afraid he'd get the blame for the killings. And that kept him from thinking straight."

"If he was out there then, though, that would mean —"

"That he might have seen the killer committing the murder," Shayne finished. Their minds were working along the same track now. He went on, "If that's the case, he knows he'd be the most likely suspect because of where I first saw him, and he'd have to be scared. If it's not Bradbury, though, who is the killer?"

"We've been operating on the madman theory —"

Shayne interrupted her again. "You and the rest of Painter's force have been operating on that theory. I've never completely bought it."

"Then what is your idea?"

"Didn't say I had one," Shayne said blithely. "We'll get together sometime before tomorrow night and kick this around, all right?"

"Sure. I'll see you at the auditorium. Good night, Shayne. Those pills are starting to work" Her voice trailed off and Shayne heard the receiver being hung up a second later. He smiled and cradled his end of the instrument.

The discussion with Terry had raised some pretty interesting questions. If Bradbury was innocent, that pretty well ruled out the madman theory, as far as Shayne was concerned. He was sure that the killer had been the one who hit Terry and knocked her out, and for that to be the case, the murderer had to be someone who was already *inside* the auditorium. Shayne thought back to what had happened, made a mental note of the people who happened to be in the area at that moment. The four people he had dealt with so far, Ernwin, Jacobs, Grant, and Faith Sadler, had all been close at hand.

Shayne grinned, then frowned, then grinned again. This was a whole new can of worms, all right, but it was an angle that had to be considered.

And with four possible new suspects, he wouldn't be lacking for anything to do over the next twenty-four hours or so, anyway.

VII

"YOU SOUND PRETTY CHIPPER THIS MORNING for a man who had a night like you did," Lucy Hamilton told Shayne over the phone the next morning.

He took a sip of strong coffee liberally laced with cognac and said, "There's a lot to do, Angel. It won't do to be dragging my tail around today."

"I thought you all knew who the killer is now, that man Bradbury."

"There's some question about that in my mind," Shayne replied, downing the rest of the coffee and washing the cup out in the sink of his apartment kitchen. "I know there's a lot of psychos loose in the world, but it seems to me like there's more to this case than that. There's some checking around I want to do."

"All right, Michael. Be careful."

"Always, Angel." Shayne hung up after saying goodbye and made another quick call. This one was to Miami Beach police headquarters, and though most of the force across the bay shared the animosity of their chief toward Shayne, he managed to get hold of someone who didn't mind telling him that Bradbury had still not been captured. Shayne promised the officer not to let Painter know where he had gotten that information, then broke the connection and left the apartment.

IT WAS A CLEAR, BEAUTIFUL SATURDAY MORNING in Miami, and the streets were alive with people. Shayne headed across the causeway, watching the sun sparkling on the water, then cut through the city to the beachfront drive, turning south toward the auditorium.

By this time, Shayne knew where to park and the guards at the rear entrance knew to pass him on through. There was no delay in getting to Ernwin's office. Shayne knocked on it perfunctorily, then swung it open.

Ernwin looked up from the paperwork spread out on his desk and raised his eyebrows. He said, "I didn't expect to see you until later in the day, Mr. Shayne. Do you have news? Has Bradbury been caught?"

"Not that I know of," Shayne said, lighting a cigarette. "A question occurred to me that I'd like answered, though."

"And what's that?"

"Just what exactly does Miss Cosmos win in this pageant of yours?"

Ernwin put down his pen, obviously warming to his subject. He said, "The girl who is beautiful and talented enough to be named Miss Cosmos is in for quite a handsome payoff, Mr. Shayne."

"I didn't ask for a press release," Shayne grunted. "In dollars and cents?"

Ernwin put his palms on the desk. "All right. The winner receives an outright cash award of fifty thousand dollars, plus a ten thousand dollar wardrobe and nearly unlimited travel for the year that she retains her crown."

Shayne tried to keep the look of surprise off his face as he said, "I thought the winners usually got college scholarships and things like that."

"In many pageants they do. But as I told you last night, the sponsors of this pageant are very business-minded, Mr. Shayne. They want only the most beautiful and talented girls entering this pageant, and to insure that, they've adopted an approach that might be called mercenary."

"Might be?" Shayne ground out his cigarette in an ashtray on Ernwin's desk and went on, "I can see why you've got pickets outside." He didn't say anything about the visit he had had the night before from Victoria Mills.

Ernwin frowned and his mouth became a line. "Those women are completely out of line!" he snapped. "We're not doing anything to degrade women. Why, we're glorifying them!"

"Maybe they figure they can do their own glorifying." Shayne shook his head abruptly. "I'm not here to debate. What else do the winners get?"

"Well . . . Nothing that you can put a monetary value on right now. But I do know that several companies have contracts waiting for our first winner, for endorsements, public appearances, things like that. I'm sure those contracts will be worth as much, if not more, than the money the winner will receive from the pageant."

"So we're talking about upwards of a hundred grand, in the long run, for the winner?"

Ernwin nodded. "I'd say that was an accurate statement."

Shayne settled back in his chair and crossed his legs. Casually, he said, "I'd say a shot at a one hundred thousand dollars would be an awfully good motive for murder, wouldn't you?"

Ernwin looked puzzled for a moment at Shayne's words, then their meaning soaked in. A look of total, aghast astonishment swept across his face.

"You must be joking!" he gasped. "You don't seriously think that one of our contestants would start killing the other girls, just to better her own chances in the pageant?"

"What's wrong with considering it?" Shayne asked.

"Why — why, a person would have to be crazy to do a thing like that!"

"You were quick enough to accept the theory that John Bradbury is a crazed killer, a psycho with a grudge against beautiful girls," Shayne pointed out.

"Yes, but — Mr. Shayne, it was *you* who found him out there in the alley with Mary Sue Hutchins' body."

Shayne sighed. "I know that. I'm just trying to cover all the possibilities. Besides, I didn't find him *with* the body. He was several yards down the alley when I first saw him."

Ernwin was shaking his head. "I just . . . just don't know what to make of this new tack you're taking, Mr. Shayne. I was so positive that Bradbury was the killer."

"He may be," Shayne said, standing up. "And when the cops catch up to him, he might give them a full confession. But until that happens, I'm going to keep on poking around."

"Of course. Feel free to do so."

THE PRODUCER LOOKED A LOT MORE SHAKEN when Shayne left his office than he had when the big investigator came in earlier. Shayne wandered around the auditorium for the next couple of hours, asking questions of everyone he came across. He and Wallace Jacobs talked briefly. Shayne saw plenty of evidence of the care Jacobs was taking with his security operation, and he thought there was no way

that John Bradbury could get anywhere near the contestants.

But if Bradbury was innocent and the real killer was someone else, another one of the pageant's insiders, now that was a different story.

He asked the contestants the same questions about Mary Sue Hutchins that he had asked about Anne Fletcher, and again he got the same answers. Non-answers would be a better way to put it, he thought. The Hutchins girl had been well-liked, but no one had known her well, and no one knew of anything in her background that would get her murdered. And as far as Shayne could ascertain, there was no connection between the murdered girls, other than that they were both contestants and both came from states in the Midwest.

Shayne took a break for lunch and went to a small eatery within walking distance of the auditorium. While there, he made a long-distance call and charged it to his office phone. The call was to a friend and associate with a large detective agency in Chicago. Shayne laid the bare details of the case out for him rapidly, then asked him to check on the backgrounds of the dead girls.

"Be glad to do it, Mike," the man said. "The usual trade-off rates, right? It's going to take some time, though. After all, it's a weekend."

"Whatever," Shayne grunted. "I'd appreciate it if you'd get cracking on it as soon as possible, though, Mac. Let me give you my phone numbers again." He rattled off his numbers at home and the office and threw in Lucy's home number for good measure, in case he couldn't be reached at the other two. The man from the Midwest assured him that no time would be wasted, and Shayne thanked him and hung up.

That was done. Now all he could do on that angle of the case was wait for results.

WHEN HE WALKED BACK TO THE AUDITORIUM LATER, he went in the front entrance, past the picketing women, who were still marching and chanting. He saw Victoria Mills among them. She looked away from him, refusing to make eye contact. Shayne supposed she was embarrassed about the incident the night before . . . as well she should have been. She could have easily gotten herself killed, making a stupid grandstand play like that.

The sound of singing was coming from the auditorium as Shayne strolled into the lobby. He recognized Allen Grant's voice, accompanied by an orchestra. The entertainer/emcee was getting in some last-minute rehearsing, Shayne supposed. He opened one of the doors into the auditorium itself and slipped inside.

Grant was walking around the stage as he sang into a cordless microphone. He wore slacks and a sweater and looked totally relaxed.

He didn't sound relaxed, though, as he broke off the song in mid-chord and snapped at the orchestra conductor, "Dammit, Phil, I told you that tempo was all wrong there."

"We picked it up just like you wanted, Allen," the conductor replied.

"Not enough. Damn, can't anybody around here get anything right?"

The last sentence was muttered under Grant's breath, but the mike picked it up anyway. Shayne was moving up the aisle slowly, and he saw the looks that the orchestra members gave each other at Grant's hard words. The murderers might have been kept from the public, but there was still plenty of trouble and tension at the Miss Cosmos Pageant.

Shayne caught Grant's eye and lifted a hand. Grant stared at him for a moment as if not recognizing him, then snapped out of his daze and said to the orchestra, "Let's take a break, all right? I think we can all use one."

He came over to the edge of the stage and down a short flight of stairs to the floor. As Shayne walked up, he said, "Well, hello, Mr. Shayne. How goes your investigation? Have the police caught Bradbury yet?"

"I don't know," Shayne told him. "Can you give me a few minutes of your time? I'd like to ask you some questions."

"Well, we're pretty busy trying to work out all the kinks. I thought it was all over except for catching Bradbury, anyway."

"The police may think so, but I'm not so sure. I think there's a chance someone besides Bradbury killed those women. What do you know about Mary Sue Hutchins?"

Grant's face turned dark with anger. Instead of answering Shayne's question, he snapped, "You damned snoopers! Always asking questions when they're not necessary. Listen, Shayne, I've got work to do, and I'm tired of you poking your nose into this. Let the police handle it, okay?"

"I'm just trying to do my job," Shayne said flatly.

"You're just trying to ruin this pageant, that's what you're trying to do!" Grant flared. "You're just like those sign-carrying bitches outside, trying to ruin a good thing!"

"Now hold on," Shayne said. "I just asked you a question —"

"One that I don't want to be bothered with. I'm going back to work."

He started to turn away. Shayne reached out and took hold of his arm to stop him.

"Let me go go!" Grant snarled, swinging around and launching a punch at Shayne's head. Shayne saw it coming a mile away and ducked under it. He could have slammed a fist into Grant's stomach and ended the fight then and there, but he didn't have to.

Faith Sadler came running out of the wings, clutching at Grant and crying, "Stop it, Allen! Stop it!"

Grant jerked free of Shayne, and Shayne let him go. The entertainer took a deep, ragged breath as Faith went on, "Fighting's not going to help anything. Come on, Allen. Let's go back to your dressing room. You need to cool off."

Her words seemed to influence him, because he glared at Shayne for a few seconds longer, then turned on his heel with a look of contempt and strode away, Faith hurrying to stay at his side.

Shayne tugged at his earlobe as he watched them go. Grant was acting a lot differently today. The night before he had been cordial, if not overly friendly. Today, he was an angry, belligerent man. Shayne supposed that the tension of the last few hours, might have stretched the man's nerves to the breaking point.

"Touchy, isn't he?" Wallace Jacobs said from beside Shayne. "I saw that little fracas developing, but I didn't figure you'd have any trouble handling Grant."

Shayne glanced over at him and said, "He seemed to calm down quick enough when Ms. Sadler started in on him."

"I'm not surprised. She's had his ear ever since this pageant business got started."

Shayne raised an eyebrow. "Something going on there?"

"Damn right. Those two are an item, as we used to say in the old days. And a hot and heavy one, at that."

Shayne stared at the spot in the wings where Grant and Faith had disappeared from view. The things that Jacobs had told him would bear thinking about, plus the agitation shown by Grant and his apparent nervousness about Shayne continuing the investigation.

Yeah, he thought, rubbing at his jaw, that whole situation just might turn out to be interesting.

VIII

THERE WERE STILL SEVERAL HOURS LEFT in the afternoon, plenty of time to do some checking and maybe satisfy his curiosity, Shayne decided. He knew that Allen Grant lived somewhere in Miami Beach. Ernwin wasn't in his office when Shayne checked back by there, so the pageant producer couldn't give him the address, but a

quick call to Tim Rourke provided the information.

"Dammit, Mike," Rourke groused after he had dug through his files and found Grant's address, "I know there's something going on besides that beauty contest. You wouldn't be so interested in Grant otherwise. And I can't get a peep out of Painter or any of his people about possible trouble."

"Are you going to attend the finals tonight, Tim?" Shayne asked.
"I had planned on it."

"Okay. Maybe with any luck I'll have a story for you afterwards."

"I knew it!" Rourke exclaimed. "There is something going on. Can't you give me a hint now, Mike?"

"I'll talk to you after the show," Shayne grinned. "Thanks for the info, Tim. So long." He hung up before Rourke could squawk any more.

The address Rourke had given him was in Bal Harbour, the exclusive residential district in the north end of the city, and Shayne left the auditorium quickly and pointed his Buick in that direction. He was confident that Grant would be at the auditorium rehearsing for most of the rest of the afternoon. That would give him a chance to do a little investigating.

When he reached the street on which Grant lived and located the right house, he parked down the block under a huge palm tree. The houses on this street were set well back away from the boulevard, behind high hedges and well-clipped lawns. Shayne could hear laughter and splashes, the sounds floating through the air from backyard swimming pools. There was an occasional twang of a tennis racket. People were enjoying this mild, lovely Saturday afternoon.

And Shayne was on his way to break into a house while everyone else was having fun.

Putting up with unpleasant things was just part of it, though. He went up a narrow drive beside the hedge that surrounded Grant's estate. It led to a service entrance, as he had suspected. It didn't take long to scale the gate, after he had checked it out for an alarm system. There was none that he could see, so he chanced it and swung up and over.

Nothing happened as he hit the ground inside the gate. The rear entrance of the house was about seventy-five yards away, and Shayne crossed that distance in a hurry. He could see an open garage with two cars in it and spaces for four or five more. But if anyone was home, they didn't raise an outcry as he trotted up to the house.

The lock on the back door held him up for ten minutes or so, but the little ring of keys and tools he usually carried finally got past it. Again,

he stood still and listened for any sounds of alarm, but none came. The place appeared to be deserted.

Shayne entered a kitchen, went through it into the dining room. The house was quiet and still, and as he started checking through the downstairs rooms quickly, he didn't see anything that was out of the ordinary for a house that cost several hundred thousand dollars and belonged to a man like Grant.

The first thing he noticed that was unusual was the temperature in the den. It was a richly paneled and carpeted room, with an expensive stereo set-up on one wall, a giant-screen television built into another wall, and huge French doors that led out onto a terrace overlooking the rear lawn of the estate. The fourth wall of the room was mostly taken up by a fireplace topped with a massive mantle, a feature that surely didn't get much use considering Miami's climate.

Shayne had just started across the big room to see if there had been a fire in the fireplace recently, which would explain the heat in the room, when he saw something that made him stop in his tracks for a moment and then run toward the French doors.

There was someone lying on the flagstones of the terrace.

Someone who wasn't moving.

Shayne threw the doors open and charged out onto the terrace, slipping his gun out as he burst into the late afternoon sunlight. Most of the body was concealed from his view by a chaise lounge. He flicked his eyes from side to side, seeing no one else, then circled the piece of furniture and dropped in a crouch beside the body.

The man was dead, Shayne knew that right away, just like he knew who the man had been. The blue coveralls were gone now, replaced by nondescript clothes, but the blond hair was the same, even though it was stained with crimson now.

JOHN BRADBURY HAD BEEN SHOT AT CLOSE RANGE by someone using a small-caliber pistol. The slug had entered his temple and didn't appear to have exited. Shayne's first thought was that the fugitive had committed suicide, but a quick glance around showed him that no weapon was anywhere in sight.

No, this was murder, Shayne knew, and he knew also that despite his flight the night before, Bradbury hadn't murdered Wilma Simpson, Anne Fletcher, and Mary Sue Hutchins.

But he had known who the real killer was. Shayne would have bet almost anything on that.

Pistol dangling loosely from his hand, Shayne started to stand up. This was going to change things. No longer could Painter and everyone

else connected with the case be so sure that Bradbury was the killer they were seeking. This death would blow the lid off the whole thing.

Shayne heard the rapid scuff of feet behind him.

He started to spin, bringing his gun up. But his mind had been too full of questions and theories about the case, and he was just a little too late. Even as he caught a flicker of movement, too brief and fleeting for him to tell who his attacker was, something crashed into the side of his head. He staggered, his hat flying off. A black curtain was threatening to drop over his eyes. The fingers of the hand holding the gun didn't seem to work anymore.

And then the black curtain dropped all the way, shutting out the world from Shayne's view. Right at the moment, he didn't care.

IT WAS THE HOT SUN IN HIS EYES THAT WOKE HIM UP dropping down behind the palms around the estate. Shayne groaned, the sound coming up from deep within him. He rolled over, the action seeming to take forever, and put his hands flat on the flagstones of the terrace. It took another eternity for him to push himself up into a sitting position.

When he could focus on the hands of his watch, he saw that it was early evening now. He had been unconscious for over an hour. Whoever had hit him had done a damn good job of it.

He remembered suddenly why he had been on this terrace in the first place and jerked his head around, wincing at the pain the abrupt movement sent through his skull. His eyes searched the pavement around him.

Bradbury's body was gone.

Shayne cursed this time, instead of groaning, and climbed to his feet slowly. It was obvious to him what had happened. Bradbury's killer had still been there with the body when Shayne arrived and had hidden somewhere until the big redhead detective relaxed his guard. Then he had clobbered Shayne and left him there while he disposed of the body. Getting rid of a body in Bal Harbour might not be the easiest thing in the world, but it would be possible. There was water nearby on both sides, the ocean to the east, Biscayne Bay to the west, not to mention several areas close by that were not as developed as this one.

Shayne checked himself over and found no injuries except the painfully swollen lump on his head. It was on the other side from where Bradbury had clipped him with the screwdriver the night before, so now he had matching bumps, Shayne told himself wryly. Somebody was going to pay for those bumps, too.

His gun was lying where it had fallen, beside the chaise lounge. Shayne scooped it up and counted himself extremely lucky that the murderer hadn't decided to eliminate him, too.

The pageant would be getting underway soon, Shayne knew. He was sure of one thing now . . . Allen Grant had something to do with the murders. That was why he hadn't wanted Shayne continuing with the investigation. The police already had a ready-made suspect in John Bradbury.

But why would Bradbury show up at Grant's house, Shayne asked himself as he went back inside. There was still a hint of heat in the air of the den.

Bradbury might have contacted Grant because of what he had seen in the alley. And the fact that Grant hadn't turned him in to the police led to one conclusion.

Allen Grant had killed Mary Sue Hutchins, and Bradbury knew it. That meant blackmail . . .

Shayne went to the fireplace. It was full of ashes. Something had been burned there recently, and Shayne wanted to know what it was.

He sifted through them, taking his time, knowing how important it was to be thorough now. It appeared that someone had burned a lot of paper, either pages from a book or documents, or something like that. And it looked to Shayne as if someone else had already gone through these ashes once.

Long minutes went by, and Shayne became more grimy and covered with ashes as he worked. But the effort paid off. When he was satisfied he had gone through the burned material completely, he had two small pieces of paper, both heavily charred and incomplete, but enough of them remained for him to tell what they had been.

He was holding what was left of two documents . . . a birth certificate and a marriage license.

Those weren't what he had expected to find. Staring at the remnants in his hands, he frowned and tugged on his earlobe with his other hand. From a gruesome but relatively simple case of a suspected psychopath murdering beautiful young women, this had turned into a muddled mess of possibilities and conjectures. But as the wheels of his brain clicked over, taking into account all that he had seen and heard over the last two days, an idea began to emerge, nebulous at first but then forming itself into a clearer picture.

"It could be," Shayne muttered to himself, remembering especially some of the things he had been told earlier in the day. The theory left quite a few unanswered questions, but at least it was a place to start.

And that was all he needed, Shayne knew, to set off some unsched-

uled fireworks at the first annual Miss Cosmos Pageant.

IX

HE HEARD THE ORCHESTRA AS HE ENTERED THE BUILDING. The guard at the rear door looked at him strangely but let him go on in. Shayne supposed that getting funny looks was normal enough when you were half-covered with soot.

All the parking lots around the auditorium were jammed, and only his access into the private lot at the rear of the building had allowed Shayne to park anywhere near the place. He checked his watch as he strode purposefully down a corridor toward the backstage area and knew that the evening's festivities were just getting underway.

Allen Grant was on stage, singing the opening number as the contestants, all of them this time, paraded along a runway in costumes that were supposed to represent their native states. Shayne saw Lester Ernwin standing in the wings, watching the show anxiously, obviously praying that nothing happened to disrupt it while the network cameras were running. Shayne could see the cameras stationed around the huge hall, catching all the action of the pageant from half a dozen different angles.

Shayne looked for Faith Sadler but didn't see her. Wallace Jacobs was standing in the wings on the other side of the stage, Shayne noticed as he stepped up beside Ernwin. The pageant producer glanced over at him quickly, then did a double-take when he noticed Shayne's disheveled state.

"Oh! Oh, my. What have you been doing, Mr. Shayne?"

"Don't worry, I won't get within range of any of the cameras," Shayne grunted. "As for what I've been doing, I've been out hunting a murderer. That was supposed to be my job, remember?"

"Did you find Bradbury?"

Shayne nodded grimly. "I found Bradbury, all right. But he didn't kill anybody."

Ernwin looked shocked. He stumbled, "I . . . I don't understand."

Shayne took his arm. "I'll explain the whole thing. Let's go back to your office. I want Jacobs and Faith Sadler there, too. And Grant, if there's a few minutes when he doesn't have to be on stage."

"Of course." Trying to control his confusion, Ernwin signaled across the stage to Jacobs, telling him to come around and meet them. He went on, "I believe Faith is in her office right now. It's on the way to mine."

Shayne knocked on the door that Ernwin indicated, then swung it

open and said, "Miss Sadler, would you join us? We're having an important meeting in Ernwin's office."

Faith looked up from her desk, cool and lovely, and said, "Certainly, Mr. Shayne. My goodness, what happened to you?"

"That's what the meeting's about," Shayne told her. He saw Jacobs walking along the hall toward them.

"What's going on?" a voice asked from behind him. Shayne knew who it belonged to.

"I figured you'd be resting up from that knock on the head you got last night," he told Terry Denton as he turned around. She looked lovely, and her hair was styled so as to almost hide the bandaged wound.

"You've got to be kidding," Terry said. "Do you think I'd miss the finals? Now, what's this about a meeting in Mr. Ernwin's office?"

"You're invited, too," Shayne said wearily. It wouldn't be a bad idea to have a representative of the police on hand, and besides, now that Terry knew about the meeting, she wasn't likely to let go without finding out what it was all about.

SHAYNE LED THE LITTLE GROUP INTO ERNWIN'S OFFICE, then stood and waited until they all sat down, Ernwin behind the big desk, the others in chairs in front of it. Then Shayne leaned a hip on the desk and said, "I found John Bradbury this afternoon."

That caused the stir he had expected. Terry leaped up out of her chair as the others babbled questions at him and demanded, "Where is he, Shayne? You haven't got him stashed away somewhere?"

Shayne held up his hands. "Wait a minute, all of you. I just said I found him. I didn't say I've still got him."

"Did he confess to the murders before he got away?" Terry asked, almost feverish in her anticipation of the answer.

"He wasn't saying anything," Shayne answered. "He was dead."

That bombshell brought abrupt silence to the room this time, instead of questions.

Shayne went on a moment later, "I don't think Bradbury killed anybody. I think he was just unlucky enough, in the long run, to have stumbled on the scene last night. He was so scared that he would get the blame for the murders that he ran like crazy a couple of times. Then he realized that maybe he could come out ahead in this situation after all."

"Because he knew who the real killer was," Terry guessed, supplying the next link in the chain.

"That's the way I see it. He saw what happened in the alley, and he

used that knowledge to try to blackmail the real killer. He got a bullet in the head for his trouble, though."

"Where did you find him, Shayne?" Terry asked tightly.

"I'll get to that," Shayne said smoothly. "First there's the matter of why those three women were killed in the first place."

"There can't be any reason but lunacy," Jacobs snapped. "Dammit, stop playing with us this way, Shayne."

"I'm not playing. I'm deadly serious. There was another reason besides lunacy. Wilma Simpson was killed because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time; she was a witness, like Bradbury. The killer's real targets were the girls, all right, but the motivation wasn't madness or even robbery, although the killer laid both of those false trails by using acid on Anne Fletcher's face and robbing the bodies. No, the girls were going to expose something that the killer didn't want exposed."

"And what could that possibly be?" Faith wanted to know.

"That they were being blackmailed themselves."

Shayne's terse statement again got looks of astonishment. He swung around to Ernwin suddenly and went on, "You told me all about the fabulous payoff for the winner. But you also said something about rules violations and making sure all of the girls were eligible for the contest. What happens if one of them didn't meet your qualifications?"

"Why, she would be disqualified as soon as we found out about it, of course."

"And it takes money to get this far in a nationwide beauty contest, doesn't it? Girls from poor families don't have the finances for a good wardrobe, singing and dancing lessons, charm schools, all the things it takes to make the finals. So if a girl had broken a rule in the past, done something that would disqualify her now, wouldn't it be worth it to some of them to pay off to keep those facts concealed?"

Jacobs snorted. "That's crazy, Shayne!" Faith was shaking her head, and Ernwin was looking horrified at the suggestion. But the thoughtful look on Terry's face told Shayne that she was considering his theory and coming to the conclusion that it held water.

"What kind of facts are you talking about?" she asked.

"Maybe that one of the contestants had had an illegitimate child. Maybe that one of them is secretly married. Anything that would make her ineligible for the contest. I imagine if someone got to know the girls well enough and had help from associates in their home states, there's enough dirt that could be dug up. Dirt that might get overlooked in the pageant's official background check."

Terry nodded. "You think Anne Fletcher and Mary Sue Hutchins

were being blackmailed, probably by someone within the pageant, and that they were ready to blow the whistle, even though it could cost them their chance at the title? So the blackmailer killed them to cover his own behind and shot Bradbury for the same reason?"

"That's the way it plays to me."

"Shayne . . . where did you find Bradbury's body?"

"At Allen Grant's house."

Terry started toward the door. "Pageant or no pageant, I'm going to bust that bastard right —"

"No!"

FAITH CAME UP OUT OF HER CHAIR, her hand plucking something from the pocket of her jacket. Terry stopped in her tracks, the muzzle of the little pistol in Faith's hand pointing at her middle. Shayne straightened and watched the tableau tensely, as did Jacobs and Ernwin, but for the moment, no one dared to move.

"The whole set-up was your idea in the first place, wasn't it?" Shayne asked Faith softly. "You worked with the girls and with their chaperones. You could pick up things from the chaperones and have them checked out by confederates back in the home states of the girls. And then they would supply you with the proof you needed to put the screws on the girls."

Faith's mouth quirked in a cold smile. The gun was steady in her hand. "You have a wild imagination, Mr. Shayne. You can't prove any of that, and I'm not going to let you disturb Allen while he's performing. We don't want to ruin the show for the networks."

"Pulling a gun is a pretty strong reaction if I'm not telling the truth, wouldn't you say?" Shayne asked.

Jacobs spoke up. "Especially since I happen to know that Allen Grant never left the building this afternoon. He had an alibi, Faith. I'm afraid you've trapped yourself."

There was desperation and panic in Faith's eyes now. She still had the gun trained on Terry, and Shayne hoped that the policewoman was ready to move and move fast when the time came.

"I didn't kill anybody," Faith said in a low voice. "Allen said he would take care of it when those stupid bitches started balking. I didn't know he meant to kill them!"

"I hope there was good money in that scheme for you," Terry said, her voice dripping with scorn. "Since it got four people killed."

"I work for a lot of different pageants," Faith said, and for a moment she sounded proud. "The plan brought in over a hundred thousand dollars last year, even with all the expenses."

"Just about what a girl gets for winning the Miss Cosmos Pageant," Shayne said. "What now, Faith?"

"I'm getting out of here, as soon as the pageant is over, and Allen is going with me. He'll have to, now. You still can't prove that your theory is anything but a pipe dream, Shayne."

"I don't know about that," Terry said. "We can run a really thorough check on the dead girls and find out if there's anything in their pasts that would make them blackmail targets."

"And I've got two pieces of documents that someone burned in Grant's fireplace this afternoon, after they killed Bradbury," Shayne put in.

"I tell you, I didn't kill Bradbury, and neither did Allen," Faith blazed.

"Shayne, Jacobs said. "She's telling the truth. She was here all day, too. But then who killed Bradbury?"

Finally, the gun in Faith's hand moved, as her face became even more twisted with anger. It centered on Ernwin, who was sitting at his desk absolutely still, ashen-faced.

"You borrowed the keys to Allen's house from me!" she accused. "You said he asked you to pick up some arrangements for him. You killed Bradbury and tried to put the blame on Allen!"

Ernwin started to shake his head slowly. His mouth worked, but no sounds came out in his terror.

"Bradbury tried to blackmail you first, didn't he, Ernwin?" Shayne rapped, still keeping an eye on the gun. Terry was moving now, almost unnoticeably, now that the gun was no longer pointing right at her. Shayne went on, "Bradbury told you to either pay up or he would ruin your pageant for you by spilling the story about the murders. He had broken into Grant's house and found the material that was being used to blackmail the contestants, too. You had to shut him up about all of it, or the contest would be ruined and all that TV money would go down the drain." Shayne's face was bleak. "I knew you would go to almost any lengths to cover up the problems of this pageant, but I didn't think you'd shoot a man in cold blood."

Faith's hand was beginning to shake now as fear and panic and rage roiled within her. Terry was just about ready to try to jump her, Shayne saw . . .

"You bastard!" Faith hissed, and she fired twice, very fast.

THE BULLETS HIT ERNWIN AND KNOCKED HIM BACKWARDS. His chair tilted and then fell, spilling him out on the floor. Terry was leaping at Faith even as the blasts echoed in the room, but Faith

twisted agilely away, lashing out with the gun and clipping Terry just above the ear.

Terry sprawled, falling into the legs of Jacobs, who was reaching for Faith, too. Shayne tried to dodge around the tangle on the floor as Faith whirled, slammed the office door open, and ducked out into the hall.

She was sprinting down the corridor as Shayne reached the door. Twisting, she fired again, sending slugs screaming back at Shayne, who jerked back out of the way. Then he went out the door in a low crouch and turned after her. Before he had gone ten feet, he heard Terry running after him.

No use telling her to go back. It was too late for that. Shayne saw Faith, gun still in her hand, run through the wings, and he heard the sudden surprised and frightened screams coming from the stage.

He plowed through the wings and out onto the stage, suddenly finding himself surrounded by shrieking girls in evening gowns. The lights blinded him for a second, then he saw Faith grabbing Allen Grant's arm and babbling out the story to him. The contestants began to scatter as Shayne raced through them, and the auditorium was full of shouted questions and cries of surprise from the audience. Shayne didn't have time to wonder about the reactions of the millions of people watching the pageant on television.

But they were getting those unexpected fireworks, that was for sure.

Behind him, Terry cried out, "Hold it, you two! Drop the gun, Sadler!"

Shayne was almost on them now. Grant thrust Faith away from him and turned to meet Shayne's rush. The whole place was in an uproar by now, with bedlam running wild. Grant started to throw a punch at Shayne's head.

Shayne blocked it. This time, there was no hesitation as there had been in their earlier clash. He put the momentum of his charge and all of his two hundred plus pounds behind a knobby fist that sizzled through the air and slammed into Grant's jaw like a piledriver. The tuxedoed Grant came up off the floor and literally flew through the air, crashing down on his back several feet away with his jaw shattered.

Shayne turned toward Faith.

She had the gun up, pointing at his face, and her finger was whitening on the trigger.

With the pandemonium filling the air, Shayne almost didn't hear the shot.

But it spun Faith around, blood suddenly blossoming on her blouse and jacket, and her pistol fell unfired. She fell with it, to lie on the

stage and move in small jerky motions.

Shayne took a deep breath and looked over his shoulder.

Terry was crouched at the edge of the stage, police revolver gripped steadily in her right hand, left hand gripping her wrist for added support. Her face was white and tense, and Shayne still thought she was more beautiful than any of the contestants who were now huddling anywhere they could find some cover.

SHAYNE WALKED OVER TO TERRY AS SHE STOOD UP. He didn't even have to say thank you. The look that passed between them said it all.

Jacobs came running up, out of breath. He saw that Shayne and Terry were all right, took in the sprawled forms of Grant and Faith, and barked, "I'll get the doctor. Ernwin doesn't need him anymore."

Faith was alive, her left shoulder shattered by Terry's shot, but she would live to stand trial for her part in the murders, the doctor assured Shayne. When she and Grant had been taken to the hospital in police custody and Ernwin's body had been taken to the morgue, Shayne and Terry and Jacobs stood on the now-darkened stage and watched the janitors struggle to clean up the evidence of the stampede out of the place.

"Ernwin confessed to killing Bradbury and burning Faith's blackmail files before he died," Jacobs told them. He shook his head. "I just can't believe it. I liked Faith. Ernwin and Grant were all right, too."

"Greed can get anybody," Shayne said, then shrugged. "Hell, I'm too tired and beat-up to get philosophic. What do you say to a drink, Red?" He looped an arm around Terry's shoulders.

"Sounds good to me, Red," she replied. "Now, let's let that be the end of *that*, okay?"

"Deal," Shayne grinned. He glanced around the empty auditorium. "Well, I guess this was probably the first, last, and only Miss Cosmos Pageant."

"I wouldn't bet on that," Jacobs said. "Your little show probably got a hell of a rating. They might want you to come back next year and emcee the damn thing."

Shayne groaned, and then arm-in-arm, he and Terry walked off the stage.

I pushed through the branches in pursuit and nearly collided with him. He faced me, rage and fear fighting for control of his face. If he had a gun, I'd be dead in a matter of seconds!

Holiday Homicide

by PATRICK SCAFFETTI

AS FELIX'S DEFT SCISSORS BRISKLY SNIPPED around my head, I relaxed comfortably in the padded barber's chair. Usually, Felix kept up a steady stream of cheerful banter as he worked, but today he was quiet. He'd responded to my few attempts at conversation with grunts or telegraphic replies.

It was shortly after five o'clock on a Thursday evening, three days before Christmas, and I was Felix's last customer of the day. The row of chairs against the wall stood vacant.

"I'll bet you've been kept busy lately with men wanting haircuts for the holidays," I remarked.

"That's for sure, Leo," the short, plump barber said.

"Are your Christmas plans all set?"

"As much as they're going to be. I'm spending Christmas Day with my daughter and her family. Other than that, it'll be work as usual." This was the barber's longest speech so far, but his tone didn't invite further questioning.

While he worked, Felix paused frequently to glance out the window at the front of his shop. It faced out onto a narrow, one-way street, now covered with snow and slush, and a bookstore across the way.

Finally, I gave up on conversation and began to enjoy the silence and the attention being given to my prematurely graying hair. I, too, gazed out the large rectangular window, letting my thoughts drift.

I stared at the display window of the bookstore on the other side of the street. Gold letters painted on the glass read WALLACE BROTHERS' BOOKS, and copies of current best sellers were arranged

to catch the eye of the passerby. Sitting there in the barber's chair, I imagined my own yet-to-be written novel on display in that window. *Michelangelo's Drop Cloth* by Leo Reynolds. I could even picture the design on the dust jacket — splotches of different colored paints on a wrinkled tarpaulin. It would be a fine, sprawling novel of city life, teeming with believable, fascinating characters. The public and critics alike would applaud my effort. It would make me rich and world renowned.

All that remained to be done was to write it.

I'D LIVED IN AN APARTMENT IN A LESS DESIRABLE SECTION of the city for fifteen of my thirty-six years, getting ready to write that book. So far, all I'd committed to paper was the title.

As I envisioned my brainchild on display, some detail seemed amiss. It took me a moment to figure out what it was. There was a hand lettered sign in a corner of the window which proclaimed NO BROWSING! HOURS SHORTENED DURING HOLIDAYS.

How on earth could they expect to sell my book if browsing were forbidden during the best sales season of the year? I was making a mental note to reprimand the Wallace brothers just as Felix jarred me back to reality.

"You notice anything strange going on over there, Leo?" he asked, holding his scissors still.

"Uh, no," I replied. "But shortening hours and prohibiting browsing in a bookstore the week before Christmas certainly doesn't seem like good business sense to me."

"I know what you mean," Felix said, putting his scissors back to work. "Crazy way to run a business. The shop just opened this past October, and they haven't exactly been overrun with customers."

Once again, the barber lapsed into silence, leaving me to my own reflections. Instead of returning to my literary fantasies, I reviewed my own holiday plans. My sister had invited me to spend Christmas with her family upstate, but I'd decided to stay in the city with Faye. After all, Julia had no use for her "shiftless" brother during the year; why should I endure a tense week with her at Christmas? And Faye was my closest friend. I'd passed some of the most pleasant hours of my life sitting in her novelty shop. No, I resolved, for me Christmas could only be here in the city.

Felix replaced his scissors with a comb, and I knew that he was nearly finished. A moment later, he sprinkled my neck with talcum powder.

"All set, Leo," he announced, swiveling my chair to face the wall mirror.

"Fine," I nodded studying my narrow face with its aquiline nose and wide brown eyes.

"Sorry if I seemed unfriendly, Leo, but I've got a lot on my mind right now," Felix said.

"So I noticed. I've never known you to be so quiet and preoccupied before."

"There's a matter that's been bothering me these last few days," he explained as I climbed from the chair. "In fact, I'm heading over to the police station as soon as I sweep up here."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

He shrugged. "I'll let the cops decide that."

I paid Felix and pulled on my coat and boots. "Have a good Christmas, Felix."

"You, too, Leo. So long."

AS I STEPPED OUT THE DOOR INTO THE GROWING DARKNESS, the cold wind seemed especially bitter on my head, now that I'd lost so much hair. I wished that I'd brought a hat. Then I remembered that I didn't own one.

Glancing across Wayne Street, I spotted Willie the Wino emerging from the alley next to the bookstore. He was wearing the baggy, soiled Santa Claus outfit he pulled every Christmas season and carrying his bucket. Willie was as tall and slim as me, and the red-and-white suit hung around his frame loosely. The long, gray beard dangling from his face resembled a dead rat more than anything else.

"Hello, Willie," I called out, waving.

He looked over at me, raised a gloved hand in greeting, then hurried down the street away from me. His walk seemed somehow steadier than I ever remembered it being before.

Willie the Wino had been a part of the city for years before I'd arrived. He was an admitted alcoholic who lived from drink to drink and scrounged for money any way he could. Every Christmas, he transformed himself into a pathetic, bedraggled Santa and panhandled on street corners. Willie's hoarse, cracked voice chanting: "Don't forget the needy at Christmas!" was as much a part of the season to me as the canned strains of "Silent Night" which echoed from every store.

Watching him hasten down the street, I remembered that his favorite spot for begging was at the end of this block near some of the busier department stores. He must have needed money for a drink

awful badly to move so quickly without even stopping to talk, I thought.

I buried my hands in my pockets and walked briskly away from Felix Gerolami's barber shop. The wind whistled and moaned along the narrow street, creating shifting swirls of snow on the sidewalk. Shop windows rattled, and loose planks on boarded-up store fronts chattered. A quarter of a mile to the west, the block ended at the river, and the powerful wind seemed to hail from this direction.

This was a typical city block. A one-way street, flanked by rows of shops with the owners' living quarters above them. Now, as poverty, crime, and neglect slowly undermined the area from within, many of the businesses had closed down, leaving vacant buildings mixed in with shops still struggling to survive.

Christmas in the city, I thought, spying a wreath hung in the window of a dry cleaner's. At this time of year, the snow blanketed the litter and filth in gutters and alleys with a cloak of white, but it never took long for cars and pedestrians to turn the snow into gray-brown slush.

On the larger streets, department stores and city offices were lavishly decorated for the holidays. But on side streets Christmas was a dusty wreath, a row of flickering colored lights, a handmade sign wishing passersby MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR.

Still, Christmas was a joyful time of the year, and it regularly breathed hope into discouraged urban dwellers. That is, unless the season turned into a time of tragedy and horror, as it had for the mayor of the city and his family.

ON MONDAY, MAYOR CHESTER GARDINER'S DAUGHTER had been kidnapped. The news hadn't been made public, but Officer Ted Myers, a friend of Faye's, had stopped into her novelty shop to ask her to keep an eye out for the little girl. I'd been perched on my stool beside Faye's cash register when the cop had entered, and I'd listened with interest to his story.

Three-year-old Lisa Gardiner had been shopping at a nearby department store with her mother. Mrs. Gardiner turned her back to pay for a purchase, and, when she turned around, Lisa was gone. The distraught mother notified store security at once, but they could find no trace of the child. A few customers claimed to have seen a girl matching Lisa's description leave the store with a man.

Horrified, Mrs. Gardiner reported the apparent kidnapping to the police and then called her husband at his office. When she hung up the phone, she told the store manager and the police to forget the incident. There had been a mistake, and Lisa was now with her father. But the woman's terror-stricken face and helpless trembling clearly informed

them that all was not well.

When contacted by the police later in the day, the mayor firmly said that the problem had merely been a misunderstanding. Lisa was fine. He made it plain that the police were to drop the matter immediately and that there was to be absolutely no publicity. The police speculated that the child had indeed been kidnapped, but that a message had gotten through to the mayor demanding a ransom and warning him not to contact the authorities.

Now, the police were conducting their own secret investigation, visiting a few shops in the area where the proprietors were known and trusted, and requesting that they keep a look out for the girl.

Officer Myers showed Faye and me a photograph of the child — a cherub-faced little girl with long, straight blonde hair and a disarming smile. Before he'd left, the policeman had told us not to discuss the kidnapping with anyone else. As far as the Gardiners were to know, the authorities were not involved in the case at all.

As I approached Faye's shop now, I hoped that Lisa Gardiner had already been safely returned to her parents. But a sickening doubt as to the outcome of the case continued to nag at the back of my mind. So often kidnappings ended tragically.

WHEN I STEPPED INTO THE SMALL NOVELTY SHOP, Faye grinned at me from her position behind the massive, old-fashioned cash register. Only her fat, wrinkled face and unkempt salt-and-pepper hair were visible. And, of course, there was the inevitable cigarette dangling from her lips and filling the room with smoke.

"You look ten pounds lighter, Leo," she chuckled.

"Well, it's been almost four months since I last had a haircut," I said. "I left a lot of hair laying on the floor at Felix's."

"Coffee?"

"Sounds good," I said, removing my coat and boots.

Faye poured me a cup from the ever-present percolator and handed it to me as I sat down on my stool.

I sipped the steaming liquid, savoring its flavor and warmth, then said, "Well, Christmas is really here, Faye. I saw Willie the Wino in his Santa Claus get-up."

"The only people his charity helps are those in the liquor business," she said, shaking her head sadly. "Poor Willie. He's really a lost soul."

I nodded in silent agreement, then drew out my pipe and began to fill it with tobacco.

"Willie was a fixture around here even before I came along," Faye

said. "I don't think anyone knows his last name. He's always been called Willie the Wino."

Faye's comment told me little. She claimed to have forgotten when exactly she opened her shop. I didn't know much about Faye's past, and she rarely discussed her life. She was in her fifties, lived alone above her shop, had been selling novelties for years, and loved cats. Even though I was perhaps her closest friend, this was all I really knew about her, except that she was also keenly intelligent, kind, and a fine conversationalist. There was little else I needed to know.

"Where'd you find that one?" I asked, gesturing toward the large Siamese cat on her lap. "He doesn't look like your typical feline city dweller."

"It's a she," Faye corrected me, "and she somehow slipped into Sid Markham's used furniture store. Sid brought her over while you were at the barber's. If no one claims her, she'll probably end up just another stray though."

"There are no strays in this neighborhood with you around, Faye," I said. "Somehow, they all seem to know they've got a home here."

JUST THEN, THE DOOR TO THE SHOP FLEW OPEN, and Willie the Wino burst in. He appeared even more ragged than usual in his shapeless Santa Claus outfit, as he staggered over to the soft drink cooler gasping for breath. His filthy beard was torn half off his face, and his rheumy eyes were wide with fear and confusion. From beneath his old red Santa's hat, a darker red stain trickled down his scraggly gray hair.

"Willie, what in God's name is going on?" I asked, helping him to a chair.

"Hit on the head," he muttered. "Saw him murdered by another Santa."

"Wait until you've settled down a little, Willie," Faye said in a concerned voice. "Then tell us what happened."

Willie nodded and began to cough. He hacked violently for several seconds, then swallowed hard a couple of times. "You've got to help me," he said.

"Now, what's this about being hit on the head?" I demanded.

Willie turned and faced us. I was surprised to see that he looked dead sober.

"I was panhandling on my corner, as usual, when I spotted another Santa down the block," he said. Obviously, it was an effort for him to remain calm. "The other Santa was standing near the alley by that bookstore across from the barber shop on Wayne Street. I yelled over

to him that he was trespassing on my territory and cutting into my business. He acted as if he didn't hear me. I walked over to him to tell him to find his own damned spot to panhandle. All of a sudden, he wheeled around and smashed me on the head with something. Knocked me out cold."

Willie paused and drew in several deep breaths. "God, could I use a drink right now," he moaned.

"Then what happened?" Faye prompted.

"I don't know how long I was unconscious, but when I finally came to, I was lying in the alley behind a bunch of garbage cans. I crawled to my feet and made my way down the alley. Just as I got to the street, I saw Felix Gerolami locking up his barber shop from the outside. The same Santa who'd bashed me walked over to Felix, said something, then whipped out a metal pipe and hit him on the head. Felix fell to his knees, and the Santa struck him a few more times. Then he dropped the pipe beside the body. It was almost like watching myself commit a murder. I staggered over to Felix, and the other Santa ran past me and disappeared into the alley. When I got a good look at Felix, I knew beyond a doubt that he was dead. Then, a man rushed out of the bookstore shouting, 'He killed him. Willie the Wino did it. I saw the whole thing.' Right then, I panicked and started running like hell until I got here."

Willie looked from me to Faye and back again. "I swear I didn't kill Felix," he said, "but no one will ever believe an old drunk like me."

"All right, take it easy, Willie," Faye said in a soothing voice.

"Willie, I was at Felix's shop about forty-five minutes ago," I said. "I saw a Santa across the street I thought was you, and I waved. Was it you?"

"No," he answered. "That must have been the killer. He looked just like me though, right down to the ratty costume."

"Willie, do you know of anyone who might have wanted to kill Felix?" Faye asked. "Someone with a grudge against him?"

Willie shook his head. "Not a soul. I don't know anything about Felix, except that he didn't care for me one bit. He made that clear every time he passed my corner. You might say he didn't approve of my way of life. He'd tell me to sober up and get a job, to quit leeching off the public."

"When I was at Felix's before, he mentioned that he was going to the police station right after he closed up shop," I said. "Something was troubling him, but he wouldn't say what it was. Do you have any idea what it might have been?"

Again Willie shook his head. "None at all," he mumbled. "I don't

know a damned thing about it."

AT THAT MOMENT, THE DOOR OPENED, and two uniformed policemen entered. One of them was Ted Myers.

"We've been looking for you, Willie," the officer with Myers growled. "You're under arrest." He began to rattle off the Miranda rights.

"Come along with us, Willie," Myers said a minute later.

Willie looked over at Faye, and his face was a study in horror. "I'm a bum and a drunk — but I'm not a murderer."

"First time I ever had to arrest Santa Claus," Myers's partner said. He took Willie's arm and led him out the door. Officer Myers remained behind.

"What was Willie doing here?" he asked.

"He ran here right after he witnessed the murder," Faye said.

"Witnessed, eh?" Myers said. "Don't believe it. We've got a reliable person who saw Willie commit the killing. One of the owners of the bookstore saw the whole thing. I'll let you know what happens." Myers turned and left the shop.

As soon as we were alone, Faye said, "I believe Willie's story, Leo. I'm sure he's innocent."

"I believe him, too." I said. "He was too damned frightened to be lying. But what can we do to help him? All the cards seem stacked against him."

"We can find out who really did kill Felix and why. That's the only way we'll ever get Willie off the hook."

"But we don't have anything to go on," I protested. "It seems like an insane, senseless murder. Felix ran his barber shop for years. He never had any trouble before. He was one of the most honest and hard-working men I've ever known."

"And that's probably why he was going to the police," Faye said, absently scratching the head of the Siamese cat on her lap. "I never met Felix Gerolami, but I've heard you and some others talk about him. He sounds like a scrupulous businessman who hated the crime that's popping up all around us. Willie even said that Felix resented his begging and boozing."

"So how does that explain why Felix was going to the cops?"

"He worked long hours, lived above his shop, and stayed to himself. He probably heard or saw something in the area that riled his indignation. And he was going to the authorities to report it."

"If what you're saying is true, how does Willie fit into the picture?"

FAYE STARED AT THE OPPOSITE WALL WHICH WAS COVERED with gag items and jokes. She appeared to be lost in thought. Finally, without shifting her gaze, she said. "Whoever killed Felix must have wanted Willie out of the way, too. They could have murdered the barber in a hundred easier, less complicated ways, instead of having someone dress up like a half-baked Santa Claus. Even *you* mistook the impostor for Willie, Leo. So there's got to be a connection between Willie and Felix. Willie did most of his begging on the corner of Wayne Street, not far from the barber shop. Maybe the killer was afraid that Willie would notice the same thing Felix did. It's clear that Willie hadn't spotted anything out of the ordinary yet, but the killer didn't want to take any chances. So he murdered Felix and made it appear as if Willie were the killer. That way, both of them were out of the picture and off the street. Whatever the killer's motive, I'll bet it's related to something going on on Wayne Street."

"You're making sense, Faye," I said. "As always."

"I hope so," she said, lighting a fresh cigarette. "I hope so. Leo, Willie said the only other witness to the murder was the owner of the bookstore, right?"

"That's right. Ted Myers said the same thing. The bookstore is directly across the street from the barber shop. I noticed it when I was getting my haircut."

Faye turned her pale blue eyes in my direction and said, "Go to that bookstore, Leo. Act casual and ask questions. Find out exactly what the witness claims to have seen."

"The poor man's Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin again," I muttered.

"You seemed to relish the role last time," Faye said.

"So I did." I rose reluctantly to my feet. "But it's starting to become a habit."

WALKING BACK TO WAYNE STREET, I WISHED that I owned a car. All the necessities of my life — Faye's shop, the public library, a grocery store — were close to my apartment, but the bitter cold of the evening made a car seem suddenly appealing. I sighed and pushed the idle wish from my mind — after all, I'd allowed my driver's license to lapse fourteen years ago.

At seven o'clock, Wayne Street was already deserted. The few shops still in operation were closed for the night, and the boarded-up store fronts seemed more pathetic than ever. I glanced across the street at Felix's barber shop, sandwiched between two empty buildings. It, too, was dark, and it would remain that way. In a few days, there

would be another dead business on Wayne Street.

Light shone through the window of the Wallace Brothers' bookstore. Inside, I saw a blond-haired, gangly man who was standing before an open cash register. As I entered, the man looked over at me with a startled expression on his face. "I thought I locked that door," he said. "The store's closed."

"Couldn't I just browse for a few minutes?" I asked.

"Didn't you see the sign in the window? No browsing."

"How can you expect to do a steady business if you don't let your customers look around?" I asked. "We readers buy most of our books on impulse, if the cover blurbs sound good."

"Don't tell me how to run my place, mister. That rule keeps the bums from loitering in here all day." He eyed me cruelly. "Now, look, I've had a long day, and I'm closed for the night. Why don't you just take off?"

"I heard that the barber across the street was murdered a few hours ago," I said. "Is that why you're so edgy?"

"Maybe it is," he muttered. "My bad luck to have witnessed the whole damn thing. I spent the last hour at the police station, and I'm tired of answering questions."

"Who killed him?"

The man rolled his eyes in disgust. "A local drunk dressed up as Santa Claus, if you can believe it."

"Why'd he do it?"

"Who knows? Robbery, revenge. Maybe he was so drunk he didn't know what the hell he was doing. Now, look, mister, please go away."

"I'm after one particular title," I said, stalling for time. "*Michelangelo's Drop Cloth* by Leo Reynolds."

"Never heard of the title or the author," he said. "Hardcover or paperback?"

"Hardcover."

The man shook his head.

The door opened, and a man who bore a strong resemblance to the shopkeeper stepped inside. He was red-faced from the cold, and he was carrying a white bag with the name of a local hamburger joint printed on its side.

"Hi, Jerry," he said, then spotted me. "Who are you?" he demanded brusquely.

"A customer," I answered. "I take it you're the other Wallace brother."

He nodded and Jerry said, "He was just leaving, Phil."

Phil opened a door at the rear of the store, passed through it, and

closed it firmly behind him. Then I heard footsteps going up a flight of steps.

"No book called *Michelangelo's Drop-Kick* here," Jerry said. He looked uncomfortable. I knew that he'd heard the same thing I had during the brief instant the door to upstairs had been open — the sound of a child crying.

"That's Drop Cloth, and you'll be hearing about it before long," I said. "Thanks for your trouble."

I returned to the cold dark night.

FAYE LISTENED INTENTLY AS I GAVE HER a detailed description of my visit to the bookstore. She smoked and petted the purring Siamese on her lap. When I finished, she said, "It's all there, Leo, and I'm finally beginning to see some pattern in the whole thing."

"I wish I were," I said.

"If you took the time to think it out logically, you'd see it, too."

"Well, tell me, for God's sake," I said.

"All right, Leo. Listen. Felix was a fair and hard-working barber. His shop looked out onto the street and faced the bookstore. He lived above the barber shop, and, apparently, the Wallace brothers live upstairs from their business, too. Felix was sure to spot anything unusual going on over there. If the brothers noticed him staring suspiciously at their place, they'd figure he knew something about whatever shenanigans they wanted kept secret. And if they were afraid he might report his suspicions to the police, they just might kill him to keep him quiet."

"But why involve Willie?"

"A lot of the buildings on Wayne Street are boarded-up. The only clear view into the bookstore would be from Felix's shop, unless, of course, you walked by the place regularly. Which is exactly what Willie did. He passed the bookstore every day on his way to beg at the corner. He wasn't aware of anything out of the ordinary going on there, but the Wallace brothers didn't want to take the chance of him finding out. So they arranged the whole set-up to get rid of Felix and Willie at one time. Phil dressed as Santa and killed Felix, and Jerry was the only witness. Right after the murder, Phil fled into the alley and slipped through the back entrance of the bookstore. A very well thought out crime, I'd say."

"But what was the secret that the Wallace brothers were so afraid Felix and Willie might know?" I asked. Abruptly, it dawned on me. "The kidnapping of Mayor Gardiner's little daughter," I gasped.

Faye nodded. "It certainly looks like it. In weather as cold as this,

why would anyone carry food home from a restaurant in a paper bag? By the time they ate it, it would be ice cold. Unless there was someone in the shop who couldn't leave. The girl must have been napping while Jerry was answering questions at the police station. And, after changing out of his Santa costume, Phil decided to go out and get Lisa something to eat."

Faye paused to light a cigarette, then continued. "And why shorten their hours and discourage browsing? Because it would look too suspicious to close down completely, but they didn't want customers overhearing or seeing anything that might arouse their suspicions. You heard a child cry, which was exactly what they feared might happen. I'm sure the mayor's daughter is above the bookshop."

I nodded incredulously, once again dumbfounded by Faye's deductive abilities. "By God, you may be right, Faye. And Felix was probably aware of the kidnapping even though it wasn't publicized. The police were going around the area asking people they trusted to keep an eye open for anything unusual. And who was more trustworthy than Felix? Of course, the cops contacted him, too."

"Exactly," Faye said emphatically. "After talking to the police, he'd seen something at the bookstore and put two and two together. The Wallace brothers must have noticed Felix watching their place from his shop or upstairs window. That's when they decided he had to die."

"Do we call the police now?" I asked.

"No, Leo, not yet. First, I want to see that bookstore from Felix's apartment. Everything we've said sounds logical, but we need some hard and fast evidence. We can phone the police from Felix's apartment once we've got it."

"But how do we get into Felix's place? I'm sure it's locked."

"You've read enough detective books, Leo — you should be able to figure out a way to break in. Come on, let's go."

AS FAYE AND I PLODDED ALONG THE WINTRY STREETS toward Felix Gerolami's barber shop, I recalled Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin once again. One of the major differences between us and them was the fact that Wolfe seldom strayed from his New York brownstone, and here was Faye waddling along beside me, already beginning to pant from the exertion. I knew that Faye hated to leave her shop and home for even a short while, but when the situation called for it, she willingly ventured forth from her limited confines.

I decided that it would be easier to break into Felix's apartment from the rear alley rather than going through the front. Faye and I

made our way along the dark alley until I said, "Here. This is the back of the barber shop."

A rickety fire escape led up to the second story of the building, and Faye followed me up the icy steps. The door to Felix's apartment was locked, but I'd thought far enough ahead to bring a screwdriver. I struggled to insert it into the lock without success.

Finally, Faye nudged me aside. "Let me try this," she said, holding up a small rectangular piece of plastic. If I hadn't known that she didn't use them, I would have taken it for a credit card.

Seconds later, she turned the knob and shoved the door open. "Felix apparently wasn't very concerned about security," she whispered as we stepped into the apartment.

Feeling my way, I guided us through the darkness toward the front window. From there, we had a clear view across the street to the apartment above the bookstore. But an opaque shade was drawn over the window, making it impossible to see inside.

"Now what do we do?" I asked.

"We wait."

AND SO WE WAITED IN THE DARKNESS for nearly fifteen minutes before our patience was rewarded. Then, the shade suddenly flew upwards, revealing a small girl with blonde hair. She looked up at the rolled shade and grinned mischievously. Phil Wallace grabbed her arm, glanced nervously out the window, and yanked the shade down sharply.

"We were right, Leo," Faye said. "That's Lissa Gardiner. Now, we call the police. I'll stay here and watch across the street, while you make the call."

"Okay."

I searched the apartment using a penlight I'd brought, but I couldn't locate a telephone anywhere.

"I don't think Felix had a phone," I said at last.

"Sh, wait a minute," Faye said.

I stepped over to her side and followed her gaze down to the street. One of the brothers — I couldn't be certain which — emerged from the shop, paused to lock the door behind him, then began walking rapidly down the street.

"I wonder if he's going after the ransom," Faye said. "Where else would he be going in this weather at this time of night? If we can't call the police from here, we'll have to trail him ourselves, Leo. Let's go see where he's going."

Faye and I left the apartment and moved quickly down the alley.

When we reached the street, we saw the man up ahead, maintaining a brisk pace.

"He passed up the only side street between here and the river," I said. "He must be going to Riverside Park."

"Let's give him a little more lead, then follow him," Faye said, her breath steaming in the cold.

When he was nearly to the river, Faye grabbed my arm and said, "Come on."

WE MUST HAVE LOOKED ABSURD BUSTLING DOWN the snow-covered street — me, tall and skinny, Faye, short and fat — but we both moved faster than we had in quite a while. The Wallace brother turned left when he got to the street that ran alongside of Riverside Park. By the time Faye and I arrived at the corner, he was nowhere in sight.

"Where the hell could he have gone?" I muttered. There were no buildings for him to have gone into.

"There," Faye said. She pointed across the street. A narrow park and a boardwalk separated the street from the river. The man was standing by the park. He looked around quickly, then disappeared into a mass of pine trees. No cars were in sight as Faye and I hurried across the slushy street toward the park, a natural oasis in the middle of a concrete and iron city.

"I wish there were a phone booth around here," Faye said, stopping near the trees.

A rustling in the pine trees caught our attention, and we both stared in that direction. Suddenly, the man appeared, carrying a brown paper bag. From where we stood, I was able to identify him as Phil Wallace. He spotted us at once.

"What have you got in that bag?" I demanded without thinking. "The ransom money from Mayor Gardiner?"

Phil opened his mouth to speak, then changed his mind and bolted into the pine trees.

"Wait here," I told Faye, dashing after Phil Wallace. He was obviously so panic-stricken to find someone waiting for him that he made no effort at stealth. I could hear him thrashing wildly through the trees several yards ahead, and I followed the noise.

"Halt," I cried. I tried to sound official, but my voice cracked on the single syllable.

The rustling stopped, and I knew that Phil had either come to a standstill or reached the boardwalk. The heavy thud of boots running on snow gave me my answer. I pushed my way through the branches in

pursuit. When I burst out onto the boardwalk, I nearly collided with Phil. He stopped and faced me, rage and fear fighting for control of his face.

Now that I confronted him, I didn't know what to do next. If he had a gun, the problem would be solved — I'd be dead in a matter of seconds.

"You son of a bitch," he snarled and leapt at me. I stepped out of his way, and he almost ran headlong into the pines. I felt relieved — at least, he wasn't armed.

Phil whirled around and lunged at me again. I jumped out of his path, and he slipped forward. The brown bag flew from his grasp and sailed toward the river. Phil frantically grabbed for it, lost his balance, and tumbled over the embankment. I heard a cracking sound followed by the slosh of water.

Breathless, I stepped over to the embankment and peered over the edge. The brown paper bag was lying on firm ice a few feet away from a large hole. There was no sign of Phil Wallace.

I stared at the hole for a full minute before walking back into the pines. The ransom money would still be there when the police arrived.

TWO DAYS LATER, ON THE AFTERNOON OF CHRISTMAS EVE, Willie the Wino, Faye, and I sat in Faye's shop, drinking coffee. Willie was wearing his tattered Santa Claus outfit minus the beard.

"I owe you two a hell of a lot," he said. "So does the mayor."

"He stopped into the shop yesterday to personally thank us," Faye said with a trace of awe in her voice. "Thank goodness, he got his daughter back unharmed. Can you imagine that? Kidnapping a three-year-old right before Christmas? I can't feel sorry for either one of the Wallace brothers. They still haven't found Phil under the ice, and Jerry can expect to spend the rest of his life in prison."

I shivered at both of their fates and said, "It was lucky that paper sack didn't go through the ice with Phil. It contained fifty thousand dollars."

Willie drained the last of the coffee from his cup and stood up. "Thanks again, Faye, Leo. And Merry Christmas."

"Where are you going?" Faye asked.

"There's still some time to get in a little panhandling," Willie said. "Who can refuse Santa Claus on Christmas Eve? After these past few days, I'm looking forward to a knee-walking, bleary-eyed holiday."

"Take care, Willie," I said as he stepped through the door.

Faye called out, "Merry Christmas, Willie," then lit another cigarette. "Story idea in any of this, Leo?"

I shrugged. "Who knows?"



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Mike Shamus

by FRED FREDERICKS



I ran down the night streets of Manhattan with shouts and running sounds echoing behind me. I tried frantically to recall if it was legal for New York cops to shoot at a fleeing con man!

The Garrulous Garrity Grand Scam

by FRANCIS M. NEVINS, JR.

HOW I GOT TO BE GEORGE BOYD BELONGS IN ANOTHER story. A bunch of us confidence persons teamed up to pull the scam of the century on the Multinat Technologies conglomerate, with me as one of the side men, but after months of sweat the thing went haywire and the perpetrators had to make like moles. All but Milo; blessed with the Turner luck, I weathered the storm in my cover as an editor at Majestic Publications, a Multinat subsidiary. Six uneventful weeks after the crisis I realized that my George Boyd persona was not going to be yanked from me by some cop, and actually began to enjoy the new identity. The job paid nicely, my Central Park South apartment was cozy, I had ample leisure to take in plays and movies and Manhattan's finest eating places with suitably dazzling women. All I had to do in return was to spend business hours behind my desk on the tenth floor of the steel-and-glass hive at 49th and Madison, running a Majestic enterprise known as *Great American Mystery Magazine*. I could almost see myself retiring permanently into this new life.

Until that Monday morning late in April when the sky fell in.

IT WAS 9:22 BY MY DIGITAL WHEN THE SMOOTH-GLIDING elevator let me out at 10. The morning *Times* under my arm, I made a brisk right and trotted down the carpeted corridor past the CPA's office and the psychiatric counselor's and the law firm's and pushed open the full-length glass door whose gold letters read MAJESTIC

PUBLICATIONS, INC. — GREAT AMERICAN MYSTERY MAGAZINE — ENTER. I good-morninged politely to Mrs. Blumeyer the receptionist, who was noshing prune danish behind the switchboard counter, and headed back to my corner office at the rear of the suite. Majestic's main office was on the sixteenth floor — every square foot of the sixteenth floor — but *GAMM* was kept on ten where it had been before its vertical neighbor had swallowed it. In terms of office luxury, privacy and freedom from excessive supervision from the head clowns upstairs, that was a break for me. I could cope with a lot of the magazine's day-to-day problems without interference.

That Monday the problems crowded in on me like shoppers at Bloomingdale's on bargain day. Almost before I was in my executive swivel the phone screamed and it was the printer announcing another surcharge on the bill for the next issue of *GAMM*. Then while I was tuning in WNCN on the office radio the phone squalled again and it was the warehouse superintendent telling me that the truckers had called a wildcat strike which would delay the shipment of the July issue to the distributors.

But it wasn't until Deb brought in the morning mail that Monday truly became funday.

"Have a nice weekend?" I asked my associate editor casually as she placed a neat stack of letters and manuscripts on my desk blotter.

"So-so," she said.

"Anything from Alan Ovel today?"

"The morning mail hasn't come yet, this is Saturday's stack. But you'd better read the top letter first." The office door clicked gently shut behind her as she left.

Dear sweet Deb. Deborah K. Howard, Associate Editor. Tall, perfectly shaped, with streaked-blonde hair worn loose and curly and twilight blue eyes and a soft mocking voice that could send ripples down a man's spine. But she kept herself inside such a thick wrap-around shield of unapproachability that I would never have dared ask her how she spent her weekends, let alone whether she'd do me the honor of spending one with me. I knew she'd wanted a career as an actress, that she'd played small parts off-off-Broadway and TV soap operas but had thrown in the towel a year ago and landed a full-time job with Majestic. She handled the routine correspondence with writers, kept track of foreign sales, gave incoming manuscripts their first reading — and their last if they were unsalvageable junk — and supervised the other employees. Without her efficiency and common sense I could never have kept up the pretense that I was an experienced editor.

But all thoughts of Deb skittered out of my mind as I read that topmost letter in the stack.

At the head of the sheet of cheap dime-store paper ETHICAL REDISTRIBUTION ALLIANCE was typed in caps. No address, no phone number, no date. The body of the letter looked like the same type as the heading.

THESES

1. In an unjust and repressive society, crimes are acts not of evil but of heroic defiance.
2. Crime fiction is 50% mental chewing gum and 50% deliberate propaganda for the establishment stigma that crime is a bad thing.
3. *Great American Mystery Magazine* is owned by Majestic Publications, which is owned by Multinat Technologies, which owns two-thirds of America. It does not own us!!!
4. Mr. Boyd, you will donate \$10,000 to Ethical Redistribution Alliance within one week and an additional \$10,000 each and every month hereafter.

The manifesto wasn't signed and made no specific threats if we didn't comply.

I picked up the theatrical prop paperknife from the desk top and tapped it against my fingernails as thoughts stampeded through the old cerebellum. Then I stabbed the phone dial and spun an 8.

"Yes?" Deb's cool voice responded.

"Conference," I snapped. "Now."

THREE MINUTES LATER WE WERE SITTING on the black leather divan facing the west window, the letter on the coffee table between us.

"It's some kind of practical joke," she insisted. "Urban guerrilla groups died off years ago. The members that didn't go to jail went to Wall Street in vested suits. And no one in their right mind could

honestly resent the fact that the bad guys in mystery stories get caught."

"Why not? If we use a black villain we get called racists, if there's a woman villain we're sexists. If one of our writers sent a story about a midget murderer and we ran it, some group would crawl out of the woodwork and call us sizzists! Why can't criminals go after us for saying crime doesn't pay?"

Deb's fingers picked at the material of her midnight-blue pant suit. "You're going to take it seriously then?"

"Let's just say I won't dismiss it as a prank. Look at that letterhead again. No address, no phone number. And no instructions how to deliver the money if we did decide to pay. They've deliberately made it impossible for us to meet their demands. Which might mean simple incompetence, or that they'll send instructions later. After softening us us." I let loose a deep and weary sigh. "Where's the envelope this letter came in?"

"In the shredder like all the others. I didn't know it was important till too late."

"Well," I concluded as I stood and stretched, "all we can do for now is ignore it. If they contact us again I'll kick the problem upstairs to Fedunka. Do we have any other crises brewing?"

"It's only 11:30," Deb smiled, grimly determined to be gay. "Give us time!"

RIGHT AFTER I CAME BACK FROM A SOLITARY burger-and-salad lunch, Deb brought in a pile of manuscripts from the morning's mail. "Alan Ovel strikes again," she proclaimed as she handed me the papers. "Another letter *and* another story. And it's a Garrulous Garrity to boot." Across my face passed the look of a man who has just stepped into a meat grinder, and Deb tiptoed discreetly out of the office. I bent cautiously over the letter as if it were an artifact from a distant galaxy.

Box 1294
Peter Stuyvesant Station
NYC, NY

Dear Boydbrain:

Well you did it again I see. Rejected "Garrulous Garrity and the Tube of Terror" just like all my others. I might have known it would be too good for you and over your head. Someday you'll beg me to write for that lousy mag of yours and I'll

laugh. And just in case you didn't know it, Georgie Porgie, five of the stories in your last issue came straight out of stories I sent you last year and you gave them the brush and passed on all the ideas to your regular stable of burned-out hacks. Is literary ethics dead? *Why won't somebody publish me???? Oh hell, what's the use?* Here's another story you can use for toilet paper.

Disgustedly,
Alan Ovel

With feet lifted to the desk top and ankles crossed I proceeded to skim the fifty-fourth submission from the persistent Mr. Ovel during my tenure with *GAMM*. The first of them had come about two weeks after I'd taken over as editor-in-chief, when Deb had brought me a manuscript entitled "Death Is Twelve Cats in a Paint Box" and said: "See what you make of this." The thing was so hopelessly bad it was almost good, and I'd asked Deb to show me any and all of his future submissions. Ovel's plots were totally inconsistent, his characters behaved like distant cousins of any recognizable human beings, his sentences resounded in the mind like the work of a drunk chimpanzee running amok through the abandoned instruments of the New York Philharmonic. I kept hoping that someday he'd include some information about himself with one of his gems, for I regularly suffered dizzy spells trying to figure out what kind of brain could have birthed them. Within a few days of each rejection letter I would find on my desk a letter from Ovel, full of ire and brimming with miff as he might have phrased it, protesting the last rejection and offering me a new epic. His series character was a motor-mouthed clown of a parody private eye with ridiculous fake-Irish speech mannerisms and the improbable name of Garrulous Garrity. A new adventure of Garrulous had become a sort of weekly event for Deb and me.

Before finishing his latest, "Garrulous Garrity and the Mini-Skirt Menace," I paused to reach into the bottom drawer of the desk and pluck out the little schoolkid notebook I kept there, the one labeled OVELISMS. Then I went back to page one of the story and transcribed into the notebook the juiciest of the author's many malapropisms. Beginning with the very first sentence: "Garrulous Garrity stood there, all his faculties rooted to the floor, hard to swallow in a hurry, staring at the cookie-covered corpse." I filled three pages of the notebook before I reached the end of the story. Then I pulled a piece of

office stationery from the middle drawer, scrawled a quick note — "Dear Mr. Ovel: Close but no cigar. Keep 'em flying!" — signed it and paperclipped it to the manuscript for return mailing. I felt like St. Francis for having taken a few seconds to encourage the poor klutz.

THE WEEK CREPT BY WITH JUST THE USUAL OFFICE ROUTINE and miscellaneous messes. An illiterate who was turned down for a secretarial job filed a sex discrimination complaint against us. The truckers' strike kept July's *GAMM* in the warehouse. A fire in the warehouse turned 20% of the July press run to ash. The air conditioning chose the first day of a heat wave to go kaput.

And then in Thursday morning's mail came the letter. "You won't like it," Deb predicted gravely as she brought it to my desk.

The typed heading was the same as on Monday's manifesto. ETHICAL REDISTRIBUTION ALLIANCE. As before, there was no address and no date. Taped to the sheet of el cheapo paper was the brief clipping from Wednesday's *Times* describing the warehouse fire. Beneath the clipping, typed in caps with what looked like a fresh ribbon, was the simple message: PAY OR SUFFER WORSE.

"I was right," I said, taking no pleasure in the fact. "They're softening us up. Did you save the envelope this time?"

Deb nodded. "It's under my blotter for safekeeping. But with these new postmarks all you can tell is that it was mailed from somewhere in the city. And since with that clipping it must have been mailed yesterday, we know that already."

I swiveled to the phone and spun the dial. "Time to bring in Fedunka," I said. "And the cops."

DETECTIVE SERGEANT PONZIO HAD A FACE that reminded me of Secretariat, the Triple Crown winner. He was pleasant and efficient and not the least help in the world. He interviewed Deb, he interviewed me, he used my phone to call the sixteenth floor and make an appointment to see Mr. Fedunka. He put in a call to the Arson unit that had checked out the warehouse fire two days ago and found there wasn't a shred of evidence of suspicious origin. He called the unit that kept an eye out for political activist groups and found that no one had ever heard of the Ethical Redistribution Alliance.

"Beautiful," I sighed. "So an organization that isn't, committed an act of arson that wasn't." It occurred to me that Garrulous Garrity could have done better than this.

"Now, now, take it easy, Mr. Boyd. Give us a chance to work on it. I'll call you if we learn anything." Sergeant Ponzio smiled pleasantly,

as prescribed by the police handbook on Community Relations, and departed for his precinct station to make out a report and throw it in the junk file.

A CON MAN, LIKE A GOOD COP OR A GOOD ACTOR, develops professional instincts, and if the instincts are off he is in deep career trouble. At some point during that Thursday morning a little voice in my head whispered advice to me. *Milo*, it said, *you are mixed into some new kind of scam. And not as the creator the way by rights you should be. This time you're the pigeon.*

I was left with such a deep sense of unease that after Pónzio left the office I couldn't settle down to cope with the morning's work. Not even a new Alan Ovel in the mail relieved my discomfort, and I skimmed it rapidly, tore a form rejection slip from a pad, stapled it to the manuscript and was just about to seal the return envelope when the voice whispered to me again.

Read that story one more time, dummy, it said.

The second time around, there was something dimly familiar about "Garrulous Garrity's Hippie Homicide," and after a few minutes of concentration I had it. The story was a retread. We'd turned it down three or four months ago when it was a non-series tale under some other title. "Hippiecide," that was it. Ovel had simply revised the thing slightly, spliced in his ridiculous eyeball from Erin as the main character, and resubmitted.

That was the first familiar thing about the story. No sooner had I caught that than I had the other. *Thanks*, I said to the voice. *I'll do the same for you sometime.*

There it was, on page nine. A pungent denizen of the counter-culture was addressing Garrity. "You're a fat Establishment pig," he said, "spouting Establishment pigma. Go swill in the mud, Porkulous Piggity!"

The line wasn't quite on the same level with the Ovelisms I had recorded for posterity in my notebook but it was well worth preserving anyway. Very gingerly I tucked the manuscript in a file folder, walked it out to the secretary's office, and made a photocopy of the entire story. I went back to my own sanctum, slipped the copy into Ovel's return envelope with the rejection form, and gummed it shut.

I had the envelope under my arm when I left for lunch. In the down-stairs lobby I found a vacant phone booth, fed coins into the slot and dialed the hangout of an old compadre who was in perpetual need of quick money.

"Yeah, Minky, it's Milo . . . No, I'm in town, but don't blab it.

Want to work? . . . Just a shadowing job at a post office. Peter Stuyvesant Station, Box 1294. Wait till someone opens the box, tail him, get me a name and address. And don't wear that stupid Bogart trenchcoat, he'll spot you a mile off." We agreed on a price, wished each other well, and I hung up.

On my way out to Madison I dropped the Ovel envelope down the mail slot and hoped to heaven the United States Postal Service wouldn't lose it between here and Stuyvesant Station.

WHEN I GOT BACK TO MY OFFICE THERE WAS VISITOR waiting on the divan, but I'd been expecting him. Mr. Fedunka, the general manager of Majestic Publications, the man I'd conned with magnificently phony credentials into hiring me as editor-in-chief of *GAMM*. He was short, gray, thickly jowled and gutted, with a voice like a pneumatic drill and a personality to match. He had his nose buried in some magazine when I stepped into the office but as soon as I walked in he reared up, stuffed whatever he was reading into the side pocket of his rumpled jacket, stormed over to the desk and shoved a letter at my face. "What the hell is going on in this shop?" he thundered. "A cop named Ponzio came up this morning and told me about this terrorist group you've teed off. And on top of that mess you stick us with a lawsuit!"

I didn't like his body language and I didn't like his words, reading between the syllables of which I sensed a subtle hint that I'd been picked as the corporate scapegoat. "What are you talking about, sir?" I asked with what deference I could muster. "What lawsuit?"

"A law firm on Broadway sent me that letter today. They represent some clown named Alan Ovel who claims you rejected more than fifty of his stories this year alone."

"Ah, yes," I sighed. "The immortal adventures of Garrulous Garrity, fast-talking hard-drinking wild Irish eye. You're damn right I rejected them. They stink. What kind of basis for a lawsuit is that?"

"Read the letter," he croaked. "The lawyer claims you've been pulling ideas out of Ovel's stories, feeding them to the writers that regularly sell to you and buying those stories from the other writers. He says eleven stories you ran this year were direct steals from Ovel manuscripts. Along with the letter he sent copies of the eleven you ran and of his eleven. The lawyer wants \$50,000 or he'll file suit."

"So he photocopied eleven stories from *GAMM*, did he?" I stared straight into Fedunka's cold porcine eyes. "Those stories are copyrighted," I declaimed righteously. "If he sues us, we countersue for infringement. Then the judge can laugh us both out of court! Look,

Mr. Fedunka, there's no need to worry. This Ovel is a grade-A nut-cake." I proceeded to give my employer a concise summary of my dealings over the months with the elusive Mr. Ovel, leaving out my private arrangement with Minky to hunt the man down. When I finished, Fedunka leaned back and rolled his bull neck against the back of the visitor's chair.

"Could you be telling the gist of Ovel's stories to other writers at cocktail parties or something?" he demanded peevishly. "Could they be sort of borrowing from the guy secondhand without knowing it?"

"Impossible. For one thing, Ovel's stories *have* no gist. They're just slapped down on paper as if he made them up on the spur of the moment. Now, it's true I've jotted down some of his worst lines in a notebook, and a few of the gang at MWA have treated me to drinks on the strength of them." I pulled the treasury of Ovelisms out of the bottom drawer and recited a few of my all-time favorites to prove my point. "'The jumbojet touched Garrity down on Oahu, the most omnipotent of the Hawaiian isles.' That's from 'Garrulous Garrity's Kona Koast Kaper.' Now here's his description of a high-rise office building like this one. 'The Soybean Exchange Building was a towering slab of mince pie standing proudly on Manhattan's dirty feet.' And, oh yes, this is the opening paragraph of 'Malpractice Is Murder': 'Doctor Cutter's office was partly ajar. The small blonde walked in and over to a picture window that overlooked eleven stories of sidewalk.' And I swear, Mr. Fedunka, that kind of line is all I've ever told anyone about Alan Ovel."

I had expected at least a mild chuckle or two from Fedunka during my recital, but his reaction seemed one of anger rather than delight, and I decided that despite his Broderick Crawford facade he must be a linguistic purist, incapable of savoring an outrageous sentence. His scowling face actually reddened as I read.

"Okay," he said when I'd put down the notebook. "I've got an appointment this afternoon with Sheldon Rogers, the copyright lawyer. He'll tell me for sure if anything you've done is actionable." He indulged in what is laughingly called a pregnant pause. "You'd better hope it isn't." And with that final subtle hint that my head was on the chopping block he flung himself out of the visitor's chair and stalked out of the office.

"This a conspiracy against me," I confided to the neutral gray walls. "A conspiracy!"

FOR THE NEXT TWENTY-FOUR HOURS life at *Great American Mystery Magazine* returned to a semblance of normality. Not a peep

was to be heard out of Fedunka, or Alan Ovel, or the Ethical Redistribution Alliance. When I called the number where Minky was to leave messages for me, there weren't any, and I visualized him slouching nobly against a wall of Peter Stuyvesant Station, waiting to connect with the tenant of Box 1294. The warehouse superintendent gave me solemn assurances that the truckers' strike would collapse over the weekend. Deb brought me three unsolicited manuscripts that were actually first-rate.

Early Friday afternoon I decided that for the rest of the day the shop could run without me. I'd seen in the morning's *Times* that there would be a panel discussion of writers and experts on mystery fiction at 2:00 P.M. at the John Jay School of Criminal Justice. What a golden chance, I thought, to pick brains on the question that had been bugging me since Monday: Was the Redistribution Alliance's statement about the nature of mystery fiction somewhat plausible, or was it totally off the wall? If the former, there was at least a possibility that a terrorist group was after me. If the latter, I was being targeted for a scam, and professional pride required me to teach the Alliance a stern lesson.

I cabbed west across town and walked the few blocks south to John Jay. A framed poster in the entrance lobby read **PANEL DISCUSSION "CRIME SOLVING: FICTION AND REALITY" — THIRD FLOOR AUDITORIUM.**

I caught an elevator, followed arrows, and joined the sparse audience in the chamber just as the panelists were being introduced. Some administrator from John Jay stood on the stage and presented the chairperson of the group, Captain Tuckett of the NYPD, who took the microphone and proceeded to introduce the rest of the gang, glaring ferociously at the audience as he did. There were a woman FBI agent, a John Jay criminology prof, a wild-bearded character in blue jeans who taught a course in detective fiction at the New School, and a white-thatched chairman-of-the-board type in a \$500 three-piece suit whom I recognized as John Belt, the mystery writer. Belt wrote police procedurals about a character named Luis Skyhawk, half Mexican and half Cheyenne, who was the homicide specialist of the Los Angeles PD. He'd gotten rich on residuals when the *Skyhawk* TV series ran in prime time for five years. With the modest rates GAMM paid, it was no wonder he'd never written for us.

I sat back in the auditorium, surrounded by empty chairs, and listened with half an ear to everyone's spiel and the ensuing crosstalk until the time came for what I was waiting for, the Question and Answer period. I raised my hand and waited to be acknowledged.

"Yes, sir," Captain Tuckett said. "The gentleman on the aisle in

the middle row." He glared in my direction. "Yes, you." He held the glare even after I'd risen.

"It's been said," I began, "that mystery fiction is mostly propaganda for Establishment values, like crime doesn't pay, everyone should obey the law, things like that. Do the panelists think that theory has any validity?"

John Belt extended a perfectly cultured hand for the microphone, coughed importantly and commenced an oration. "Detective fiction presupposes a stable society, a regime of law and order, where the police and the authorities are seen as good, decent, honest people. Its enduring popularity among Anglo-American readers can best be attributed to this aspect of the form"

In mid-sentence Belt was interrupted by the bearded prof, who roared an eight-letter word denoting an object frequently found in cow pastures in a voice so loud he didn't need the mike. "That is *not* what the genre is about! Mr. Belt is describing one tiny subtype, the old-fashioned, racist, sexist, deductive kind of detective story which has been justly called the recreation of narrow, life-hating and ignoble minds. Read Hammett, read Chandler, *there's* the American detective story. The private eye, the loner as hero, the outsider who sees through the crap we call Establishment values. The murderer's a pretty nice guy compared with the plutocrats and politicians"

At which point the FBI lady took the mike from John Belt and called the prof a pinko and the panel quickly degenerated into a shouting match, with my question long forgotten in the melee. The only speaker who didn't get into the act was Tuckett, who sat still as a waxwork on the stage, glaring out at me. I vacated my seat and walked. Wasted afternoon. How could I get a straight answer if the experts went for each other's throats? I cabbed disgustedly uptown to my pad on Central Park South and poured myself a very large glass of white wine.

Halfway into my third glass I pulled over the phone and put in another call to Minky. "You did? . . . And you stayed on the trail all the way from Peter Stuyvesant to Is *that* so? You bet you've earned your money, pal, thanks a few mil." I hung up and started pacing the shag carpet of the living room. Start of a weekend or no start of a weekend, I had to do some fast and furious cogitation.

SATURDAY MORNING I WALKED EAST AND SOUTH to the office to put in the time I'd missed Friday afternoon. Except for me the GAMM suite on the tenth floor was empty. I sat behind my desk and tried to work out my next move. Around 10:30 I heard a sort of soft clatter out front: mail being pushed through the slot in the entrance

door. I went down the corridor, past the vacant switchboard and scooped up the one item that lay on the linoleum.

It was a copy of *GAMM* for July. Paperclipped to the gaudy cover was a folded sheet of dime-store paper with that old familiar typed heading **ETHICAL REDISTRIBUTION ALLIANCE**. The message beneath the heading was short and simple.

All incidents of anti-crime propaganda in this issue are underlined. Have \$10,000 in cash ready by 12:00 noon Monday and wait for delivery instructions. You know by now that we mean business.

Feeling as if the hind end of an elephant had just rammed my solar plexus, I skimmed the pages of the issue. It took less than five minutes to complete the count: twenty-two separate sentences or paragraphs underlined with a red felt pen.

And then I reread the last sentence of the covering letter, only with a different emphasis. You know *by now* that we mean business. And, with the office locked up this Saturday, the Ethical gang must have expected that the letter wouldn't be found till Monday morning.

So what was going to happen over the weekend that would convince us by then that they meant business?

I raced down the interior corridor to the doorless doorway of Deb's office and grabbed a volume from the shelf of telephone directories. She had a place on Staten Island but I'd never bothered to look up the number before now. I found her listed in the Staten Island directory and went over to her desk and sat and dialed.

"Hel-hello?" It was her voice and it could still send ripples down my spine, because there was terror in it.

"It's me, Deb. George. Are you okay?" My voice was quivering like a taut bowstring. "What happened?"

"I'm still shook up. About two hours ago I went down to the corner newsstand for a paper and someone tried to push me out into a street full of cars. Luckily I recovered my balance and got back on the sidewalk, but I was almost run over. There were a lot of people around but no one will admit they saw anything. The police think it was just someone wanting to grab my purse. A precinct detective left here a few minutes ago."

"That wasn't a purse snatcher," I told her. "It was our buddies from the Ethical Redistribution Alliance. Letting us know they mean business." I filled her in on the morning's communique from the terrorists. "Look, stay bottled up in your apartment the rest of the weekend. If you've got a boy friend, have him come over. And for God's sake keep

your door locked! Want me to take the ferry over and stay with you awhile?"

"No, I'll, I'll be all right." The way she said it gave me no clue at all whether there was a man in her life or not. "See you Monday morning, George."

I hung up, and sat there a minute, running my eyes absently over the wall-to-wall steel shelving that faced Deb's desk. The shelves were jammed to capacity with the ten office file copies of each issue of *GAMM* from its beginning in the late Sixties to the new July issue.

The issue that was still stuck in the warehouse thanks to the truckers' wildcat strike.

I got up, stalked over to the shelves like a cat after a plump juicy mouse, and counted the copies of the July issue.

Nine.

And suddenly the whole lunatic skein of events made sense.

I whirled back to the phone and dialed Deb again and asked her one precise question about an incident in her office early Thursday afternoon. And got precisely the answer I was hoping for.

THE FINAL SCENE OF THE FARCE WAS PLAYED OUT in the living room of a high-ceilinged, ornately furnished old apartment in the Nineties a block from Broadway. There were two actors in the scene, but all the good lines, I say in modesty, were mine. Toadface Fedunka just sort of sat there deflated in a high-backed wing chair like a lifesize balloon the night after Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

"No wonder you looked so upset Thursday when I read you some of the worst of Alan Ovel. I was kicking your dear little brain children! Judging from all the outdated references to things like miniskirts and hippies I'd say most of them were written several years ago, right?"

"I inherited a little money in the late Sixties," Fedunka mumbled wretchedly. "Quit the job I had, left my wife and started writing. I thought I'd be the new Raymond Chandler. I couldn't sell a word and in a couple of years the money ran out."

"But all those stories stayed in your trunk," I continued, "until you dreamed up a way to use them in a scam. Bombard my magazine with them, then after a few months fake a letter from a lawyer threatening a plagiarism suit and, with luck, pick up a nice out-of-court settlement from Majestic. Only the scam had the same weakness your stories have. It was flying by the seat of the pants stuff. If you'd bothered to do some research you'd have learned that the copyright law doesn't protect ideas but only the expression of ideas. To prove infringement you have to establish substantial similarity between your

work and the other guy's, and any similarities between the Alan Ovel stories and what we run in *GAMM* were only on the level of ideas, like a private eye, or a tough cop, things so general that no one legally owns them and anyone can use them. You learned that when you consulted Sheldon Rogers the other day, didn't you?

"But it didn't ruin your plans completely because you had a second scam in the works at the same time, the Ethical Redistribution caper. Mail us a few threatening letters, keep us on edge, build up a terrorist reputation by claiming responsibility for a few accidents like the warehouse fire, and pretty soon you might scare Majestic into paying off. Only you couldn't come up with a safe way to arrange for the payment. With your bullfrog voice you couldn't give us instructions over the phone or you'd be recognized, and if you gave them to us in writing we might call the cops and set a trap. So while you tried to think up a foolproof answer to that problem you decided to soften us up a bit more by going out to Staten Island this morning and attacking Deb. Then on your way back you stopped at the office and shoved a copy of *GAMM* for July into the mail slot with a new threatening note. And that was where you blew it to smithereens, Fedunka. That issue isn't on the stands yet! The truckers are striking the warehouse, and the only copies-around are the standard ten file copies the printers mail to the office every month. I went into Deb's office and saw that one was missing, and then I remembered that when I came back from lunch Thursday and found you in my office, you were reading some magazine that you put in your pocket and took out with you when you left. That was the tenth copy. That's how I knew it was you."

"Rotten luck," Fedunka muttered. "Nothing but rotten luck."

"Nothing but carelessness and stupidity," I told him. "The first Redistribution letter, the one that came Monday, was written in the usual straightforward business English, except for one phrase: 'Establishment Pigma.' I just thought it was a neat little coinage, *pigma* for *dogma*, and didn't pay any more attention to it — until later in the week when you sent us an old *Garrulous Garrity* story where the exact same word, *pigma*, popped up again! Of course it could have been coincidence, two writers happening to use the identical coined word in communicating with *GAMM* during the same week. But it gave me huge hint that the terrorists were connected somehow with Alan Ovel."

And of course once Minky had identified the tenant of Box 1294 as Fedunka, even a *Garrulous Garrity* could have figured out that the Ethical Redistribution Alliance must be Fedunka too. But it sounded far more impressive and devastating with that part left out. Milo's

Maxim #36: Always make the most of your material.

"All right, Boyd," he croaked. "I needed more money and tried a few fast ones and you caught me. What happens now?"

That was the problem *I* hadn't been able to solve. Turn a fellow con artist, even an inept one like Fedunka, over to the cops? Professional ethics forbade, and even if I did turn him in, my own George Boyd persona would be closely scrutinized during the investigation and probably wouldn't survive. Tell him to forget the whole thing? But then he'd be bound to wonder why I'd been so generous, and again good old George would be threatened. Take a chunk of cash from him and scram from the scene? Unfortunately it was late Saturday afternoon and the banks were closed, so where would he find the money?

"I haven't decided that yet," I told him honestly. "So you can sweat it out till Monday morning, and then we'll both know. And don't think up something cute like trying to zap me between now and then, because I sent a tape cassette with a report of the entire scam plus all the physical evidence to a lawyer friend of mine, and if I don't call him every eight hours till Monday morning it goes straight to the cops." It was a good lie, I thought. I would have done just that except that the office tape machine was on the fritz.

I left Fedunka slouched over in his chair like a broken toy and found my way out of the apartment.

IT WAS A LITTLE AFTER 7:00 p.m. when I stepped into the lobby of my building on Central Park South. As I was heading for the elevator two men eased up off the low-slung foyer couch and started to close in on me. I saw their reflections in the floor-to-ceiling mirror ahead of me at the end of the lobby. Both had plainclothes cop written all over them. The young one was a stranger to me but the middle-aged guy I recognized. Captain Tuckett, the moderator of the John Jay panel, who had spent so much of yesterday afternoon glaring in my direction. Running my face through his memory bank.

I ran to a corner of the lobby and slipped through the service door into a back corridor and raced through the laundry room and the parking garage and out another service door and into the night streets of Manhattan with their shouts and running sounds echoing behind me and as I ran I tried frantically to recall if it was legal for New York cops to shoot at a fleeing confidence person.

How I got out of the city with nothing but the clothes on my back and the stuff in my wallet belongs in another story. A few months later, safely ensconced in a San Francisco hideaway, I ventured out to Union Square one evening and on impulse bought the latest number of

GAMM at a newsstand. The first item I turned to was the masthead to see who had replaced me.

Deborah K. Howard, Editor in Chief.

And the quality of the stories hadn't dropped the least bit. ●

Toot

In case some of you might not have seen **THE BEST DETECTIVE STORIES OF THE YEAR** (1980), as a public service (and to toot our own horn) we present the following information:

MSMM was represented with two stories:

CORRESPONDENCE WITH A BICYCLE THIEF by Jerry Jacobson (September)
A REAL NICE GUY by William F. Nolan (April)

On the Honor Roll were:

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION by Jon L. Breen (January)
A FEAR OF SPIDERS by Patrick Scaffetti (March).
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Personally and editorially, I think all the stories appearing in MSMM are winners — or they wouldn't be in the magazine. 1981 was no exception. Now, here we are in 1982. This issue is a good start. Hope you enjoy it!

— CEF

It was a strange country, with forbidding cliffs and long stretches of beach, and a wind that sprang up suddenly in the night, along with peculiar cries like the wails of a tortured soul. There was something afoot, something out of the ordinary — a murder without a trace of the murderer!

The Adventure of the Mocking Devil

by CHARLES PETERSON

THE SPRING OF 1890 HAD BEEN AN UNUSUALLY ACTIVE ONE for my friend. The curious activities of the Herzegovinian goldsmith, the brutal murder of the Black Forest clockmaker with its astonishing repercussions in the court of the Emperor of Austria-Hungary, and the intricate matter of the British Foreign Secretary's teapot — all these combined to try his physical resources to the utmost. But it was not until mid-July, with the notorious Dr. Trapp safely behind bars, that I was able to persuade him to embark on a well-earned holiday. We traveled incognito, for such was his renown that even in France he was continually being recognized. We made a sort of game of preserving our pseudonyms, carefully fining each other one franc for every slip.

Thus it was as "Mr. Holbrook" and "Mr. Wilson", a pair of English gentlemen on a leisurely tour of Brittany, that we found ourselves the guests of the Grande Hotel de l'Univers et Bretagne, in the tiny fishing village of St. Guenole, a picturesque cluster of whitewashed houses, from every gable and window of which blue-hued sardine nets hung drying in the sun.

HAVING FINISHED OUR SIMPLE BREAKFAST, I TOOK A TURN on the balcony giving off our low-ceilinged sitting room. Even at that early hour, the air was heavy and still, redolent with the aroma of the sea.

"Another sultry day, Holbrook," I observed.

"M'm," replied my friend, noncommittally. "And a tedious one, I fancy, unless —"

"Unless what? Surely, my dear fellow, inactivity cannot be weighing upon you so soon?"

Holbrook chose not to reply directly. His lean face was thoughtful; his sinewy fingers filled his pipe as though of their own volition. "Unless we find something worthy of our attention here."

"In this somnolent village?"

Holbrook puffed his pipe. "It is a strange country. Inviting stretches of beach alternating with forbidding cliffs beaten into barbarous shapes by centuries of wind and wave. You noticed the wind that sprang up so suddenly last night, toward midnight? Our host tells me it is a phenomenon as regular as the tides, here at St. Guenole, and is rumored to drive men mad, like the mistral. The populace is noted for its tenacious grip on old customs and odd superstitions; the landscape is dotted with weird megaliths built by a vanished race of druids. There is an atmosphere about this country, Wilson, of unimaginable powers lurking unseen in shadows."

"Rubbish!" I exclaimed. "This is overwork and fatigue talking, Holbrook!"

"Perhaps. But did you not hear those peculiar cries in the night, like the wails of a tortured soul?"

"A night-bird of some kind."

Holbrook shrugged. "In any case, you cannot have failed to remark the singular nervousness of our host, Guilloux, as he conducted us to our rooms last night? His hand shook until I thought he should extinguish the candle, yet from the look of him you'd hardly expect him to own a set of nerves. Then there was that knot of villagers in the tap later on, discussing something with uncommon vigor."

"A local political argument, no doubt."

"Political arguments are seldom surrounded by an atmosphere of such nervous constraint, Wilson. No, depend upon it; there is something afoot. Something out of the ordinary, to upset these stolid Breton folk."

Even as he spoke, we became aware of excited voices in the square outside our window and, rushing to the balcony, we found a group of townspeople around a fisherman in blue denim jacket and black beret. Our landlord, Michel Guilloux, pushed his heavy-shouldered frame through the growing crowd and halted below our balcony at Holbrook's call.

"Ah, monsieur, a most dreadful tragedy! It is necessary to telegraph

the authorities at Quimper immediately. The body of M. the baron de Gouarec has been discovered on the beach —” he gestured toward the south — “and Louis, he of the black beret, says he has been murdered!” The innkeeper made a movement as if to go, only to give us a thoughtful look. “But the messieurs are English. That may be to the good.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mademoiselle Anne, the baron’s daughter, is engaged to an Englishman. A military gentleman, messieurs; and the whole world is aware of the enmity between father and fiance.”

“And you believe he may need our help?”

Guilloux divested himself of responsibility with a Gallic shrug. “If the authorities prove difficult. You see, they may not believe in devils who strike from thin air and leave no trace but a mocking laugh that lingers on the night wind.” The landlord gave a little shiver and dropped his voice to a whisper. “It was assuredly such a one, Louis says, that struck down the baron!”

IN THE PAST, HOLBROOK HAS COMPLAINED THAT THE SUPERSTITIOUS fears of some townsfolk have hampered his investigations. In the present case they acted otherwise, for the villagers who rushed to the scene upon hearing Louis’ news were well content to remain at a discreet distance. Louis himself accompanied us, together with our landlord, and kept up a running commentary as we walked.

“It was a devil, of a certainty,” the fisherman maintained. “Did he not attack me, myself, on this same beach not a month ago? Michel —” this to the landlord, by way of appeal — “did I not tell you how I fought with him in the darkness, and how he mocked and laughed before disappearing in a flash of fire and brimstone?”

The landlord’s reply was gruff. “You have told us many things, Louis. In point of fact, the only thing more certain than the twinight wind is that you will appear at my tavern at precisely eight o’clock on Saturday evening and drink yourself into a state in which you might expect to see a thousand devils.”

Louis’ reply, if any, was cut short by Holbrook’s gesture. “Stand back, if you please,” he said. “I should like to examine the area without having to account for four more sets of footprints. If I am not mistaken, this is as close as you approached the body, my good man, is it not?”

Louis nodded. “It was clear the man was dead from where I stood.”

“Observe, my dear Wilson, how faithfully this hard-packed sand takes footprints! And how fortunate that we’ve had no high water to

obliterate them. Curious, the variety of sands one finds on a single stretch of beach; there is a patch that is quite reddish, compared with the white of most of this beach, while toward the moorland it shades off to dark brown."

His unaccustomed loquacity betrayed Holbrook's excitement. For myself, I could spare little attention for anything but the dreadful scene before us.

THIS WAS A SMALL BIT OF BEACH, LESS THAN A MILE altogether, bounded by a rocky headland to the south and another to the north just beyond our village. To our left, dunes and rank grasses climbed to a moor stretching eastward to scrubby hills, the nearest of which was capped by a craggy-looking mansion of stone. Built in the rough-hewn Breton style, it resembled an outcropping of the hill itself. One or two rustic cottages farther to the south were the only other signs of human habitation. And midway between grass and sea lay the body of a man, facing the empty sky.

Of more than average height and breadth of shoulder, the baron was dressed in a heavy brown tweed walking suit and vest, and wore sturdy square-toed shoes. A gaping, powder-blackened wound in his chest showed with brutal clarity how he had met his death. A spiky black beard pointed upward, and the dead man's expression was one of such malevolence that I shuddered in spite of myself. That he had made some attempt at self-defense was indicated by the thin, deadly-looking sword cane whose blade glittered in his right hand, while his left still grasped its brass-ferruled scabbard.

Holbrook examined the sands with the utmost concentration and, after casting about some yards in all directions, returned to the body, subjecting it to careful observation with his pocket glass. As if in answer to my thought, he muttered, "There is nothing to show that he wounded his adversary. The alarm must have been sudden and unexpected; he was struck down before he had time to do more than draw the blade."

"Someone was lying in wait for him, then?"

"Most perplexing!" was Holbrook's only rejoinder. Then, noting my bewildered air he added, with some asperity, "Surely the peculiar feature of this case is obvious to you, Wilson? Mark you, there —" he pointed to the fisherman's footprints — "is the closest Louis came to the body. A good twenty yards away. Stretching down the beach as far as one can see, and straight as an arrow flight, are the square-toed prints of the victim. There is not a sign, until the last yard or so, that he might have been running or in any way conscious of danger — yet he

was shot at point-blank range."

"That's clear enough, certainly," said I.

Holbrook's tone was almost savage as he turned on me. "Clear, is it? Then, Wilson, be good enough to tell me where you see any print that might belong to the murderer!"

I COULD ONLY STARE AT HOLBROOK AS THE FULL IMPORT OF his words dawned on me, while Louis, who had come up to join us in time to overhear Holbrook's exclamation, nodded vigorously to Guilloux as though he found himself vindicated.

"Did I not tell you it was a devil, messieurs? Of a truth, it might have been I myself lying there instead of the baron, had not *le bon Dieu* given me strength to fight off the evil one."

"Perhaps the evil one came to claim his own, then," rejoined the landlord, drily. "You must know, Monsieur Holbrook, that between M. le Baron and his neighbors there was little love lost. A man of fearsome temper, monsieur, and heir to a name which has been feared and hated, hereabouts for centuries. It was not for protection against sand-flies that he carried that sword-cane!"

"He had many enemies, then?"

The landlord's face darkened and he swept his arm in a gesture that encompassed the whole countryside. "Enemies! Louis, here, once owned his own fishing boat; today, thanks to the baron, he is lucky to hire out as crewman. There are many, myself included, who had reason to feel the remorseless hand of de Gouarec as tenants or debtors."

"Had he no close friends?"

"None in St. Guenole; and those he brought here from Paris — well, we know little of them except that they appeared cut of the same cloth as the baron himself. Here there was only Emile Reynaud, and even he broke with the baron last year."

"Who is this Reynaud?"

"He lives in that first cottage to the south. A former professor of physics at the University of Brest, who took up residence here when a nervous breakdown forced his retirement. He and the baron seemed to enjoy one another's company, until one evening when the baron publicly ridiculed him as a charlatan, on the occasion of a lecture Reynaud was giving in Quimper."

"Do you recall the subject?"

Guilloux's brow creased in an attempt to remember. "Something about some crazy Americans who were trying to build a flying machine."

FURTHER QUESTIONING WAS HALTED BY A SHARP CRY and, turning, we spied a young couple running toward us over the sands. The girl was fair-haired, violet-eyed, perhaps twenty years of age; the young man a tall, sandy-haired Englishman with a military moustache and erect bearing.

"Oh, it cannot be true!" the girl cried as, shaking off the young man's restraining hand, she pushed past us. Her hand flew to her mouth, with a sharp intake of breath, as she espied the corpse, and she whirled to bury her white face in the young man's shoulder. We drew away and in a few moments the lady was sufficiently recovered to face us once more, though she resolutely avoided glancing again toward the body.

"Forgive me, gentlemen," she said, with an effort. "One of the villagers just brought us the news. I am Anne de Gouarec; this is my fiance, Charles Ledgerwood. And —?" Her eyes widened. "Why, you're —"

"Stephen Holbrook, of London, mademoiselle," my friend interposed smoothly. "This is my colleague, James Wilson."

Anne de Gouarec acknowledged the introduction. "Ah, for a moment I thought you were a gentleman who was once pointed out to me in London."

"I am sorry we meet under such tragic circumstances."

"I won't pretend," said the young lady, "that my father's death is a great personal loss. Until this month I had not seen him for seven years, since my mother left his roof and took me with her to England. She had means of her own."

"And what brings you back now?"

"My mother passed away a year ago. When I became engaged to Charles, I hoped to gain my father's approval, since he is all the family I have left. Charles and I came for a visit, together with my old governess, Lottie." She paused. "It was a mistake."

"The villagers claim you quarreled with the baron," Holbrook said to Charles Ledgerwood.

The young man flushed. "He was civil enough at first, but it soon became apparent that he was determined to break our engagement and induce Anne to return here to live. Evidently he had never forgiven Anne's mother for deserting him and removing her small fortune from his grasp. I accused him of wanting to regain control of it through Anne, and that was the cause of the altercation the servants must have overheard."

"It must have been an uncomfortable time for both of you," I said.

"We spent as little time in the house as possible," the girl admitted,

"and a great deal of time exploring the dolmens —" she pointed to the distant hill, where one could see a number of the table-like constructions of ancient, lichen-covered stones that are so curious a feature of Brittany — "or indulging in archery. Both Charles and I enjoy the sport."

"I have finished here," Holbrook said, and with a parting suggestion to Guilloux to post a guard to await the authorities, he began retracing the baron's path. "Tell me," he asked Anne de Gouarec, "why was your father on the beach at so late an hour?"

"It was his inflexible rule to take a two-mile walk before retiring. Unless the weather were stormy, he would get his hat and stick precisely at eleven o'clock and proceed to the beach via the south walk. Then he would walk along the beach and return to the house by the north walk."

"A brisk, steady walker, too, I perceive," said Holbrook. "But not a sign of another soul — unless that should prove to be one."

He pointed to a line lightly traced in the sand, as with a finger. It ran straight for ten yards or more, then vanished.

Charles Ledgerwood shrugged impatiently. "The track of some animal or sea-creature?" he suggested. "Surely it has no relevance to this crime, Mr. Holbrook?"

Holbrook smiled. "Anything may be relevant at this stage. And this is the third such mark between here and the spot where the attack occurred."

"Here is the south path leading back to the house," Anne de Gouarec said. "Would you and Mr. Wilson care to return with us? Perhaps we could give you breakfast"

"Thank you, no. My friend and I have breakfasted and I have one or two small questions I should like to ask of M. Reynaud, whose cottage, I see, is at hand. Perhaps we can join you later on."

"A handsome young couple," I remarked, as they took their leave. We climbed grassy, rust-colored dunes to the cottage, a solidly-built affair of stone with stout oaken door and weathered shutters tightly closed. There was no response to Holbrook's knock so we went round to the back, where a ramshackle barn leaned away from the prevailing sea winds, and knocked at the back door with equal lack of result. Upon my trying the latch, however, the door swung open and we entered, calling Reynaud's name.

THE COTTAGE CONTAINED BUT ONE CLUTTERED ROOM, with a kind of large closet for the bed, and was crammed full of various items of cheap furniture: a desk piled high with books and papers and

scientific journals, including the proceedings of the Societe Meteorologique de Paris, a kitchen table still holding traces of a meal that included a chop and peas, a stained and blackened cookstove, cupboards, a wardrobe press, and more. Holbrook seemed to absorb it all in a circuit of the room.

"A bachelor with a taste for scientific inquiry, Wilson. Reports of the meteorological society along with these from the Societe Aeronautique. Not overly fastidious about his person, yet with a streak of vanity — he sends to Paris for this pomade for his moustache. A hunter at one time? Here are two small gauge shotguns, both rusty with disuse. But what are we to make of this pistol, Wilson? Clean and well-oiled, as befits a dueling pistol made by Alphonse et Cie. — and here is the case, made for a pair, you see."

"The other could be anywhere in this conglomeration," I ventured. "M. Reynaud's personal effects are not marked by a sense of order."

"And yours is affronted by the spectacle, I see. Well, well, perhaps we shall find things neater in the barn."

We made our way past an unkempt vegetable garden to the small frame building which Reynaud appeared to have fitted out as a laboratory for the observation of weather phenomena, with anemometer, recording barometer and thermometer and numerous other instruments. Along one wall a messy workbench spoke of another of Reynaud's interests, in what Holbrook informed me were models of wing sections for some sort of flying machine, though he shook his head over my suggestion that such a contrivance could be involved in our mystery.

"I cannot conceive how such a machine might be launched at night," said he, "nor how it could descend upon the baron unsuspected, with its noisy internal combustion engine, or permit the operator the nicety of control which would enable him to fire so well-aimed a shot. Dear me, I'm afraid our friend Reynaud will never extricate these brushes from this pot of glue. It has set quite solidly."

Outside of a small stove which stood near the doorway together with a heap of straw which its owner apparently used for fuel, there was little else of interest in the bar. I remarked as much to Holbrook, who looked thoughtful as he replied, "Yes; and yet one can't help but wonder at Reynaud's predilection for glue. I should like to ask him what, other than an aversion to nails and screws, could account for such quantities of glue-pots."

A shadow filled the doorway as we turned to leave. "It will be impossible to get that information, monsieur," said Michel Guilloux. His face was grey, his manner heavy. "The body of Emile Reynaud has

been discovered at the foot of the cliffs north of the village. Our demon of the darkness has claimed another!"

NORTH OF ST. GUENOLE, SWEEPING IN A WIDE ARC TOWARD the Atlantic, the pleasant beach gave way to a headland rising two or three hundred feet before dropping sheer to the sea at its northernmost face. It was at the foot of this cliff that a group of children had spied Reynaud's body. As we approached with Guilloux and a few others, we found a group of villagers at the top of the precipice, watching the efforts of a trio of younger men to descend the face and recover the victim.

Holbrook's first concern was not with the unfortunate Reynaud, however, but with the scene of his death; and his sharp eyes scanned the area as a hunting dog draws a covert. "Poor ground for prints here," he murmured, "and our well-meaning friends have doubtless obliterated any that could have been of value. Here's where the poor devil went over the edge — those are heel marks, Wilson, and here are a few wisps of black thread caught on this bush where the twigs are broken. Clearly, Reynaud was dragged up this hill —"

"And thrown over the edge? Are we dealing with a madman, Holbrook?"

"Or a demon, as our host maintains." At my impatient exclamation he added, "Have you any better explanation for two violent deaths, without a trace of a murderer in either?"

I sputtered indignantly. "Nevertheless, I decline to attribute them to supernatural beings, Holbrook! There must be another answer." I refrained from adding what was in my mind: that had Holbrook not been suffering from the effects of overwork, these dark fancies would quickly have been rooted from his musings. Indeed, the first flush of excitement over, my friend now seemed strangely withdrawn and disinclined to pursue the matter, for he abruptly stated he did not wish to wait for the recovery of Reynaud's body, though that event was evidently only minutes away.

"You may give me the particulars, Wilson," he said. "I'm off to the village to inquire into M. Reynaud's shopping habits."

"But what shall I look for?" I called after him, to which he replied carelessly over his shoulder, "Anything of interest — such as the sort of belt Reynaud was wearing when he went over the cliff."

THE HEAT OF THE DAY, NOW THAT THE SUN WAS AT ITS zenith, and the long walk back to our hotel, combined to put me into a state of damp irritability which not even the picturesque beauty of the

surroundings contrived to dispel. Nor was my mood improved by the discovery of Holbrook in the public room of the hotel, taking his ease as if without a care in the world. With him was a short, balding man with a neat black beard and moustache. As I entered, Holbrook sprang to his feet with an alacrity that contrasted with his previous ennui. "Ah, Wilson, what news? This is Inspector Varagnac of the Bureau des Police at Quimper. I was trying to persuade him to restrain from arresting young Charles Ledgerwood for murder until we heard your report."

"Holbrook," said I, "if these natives were aware of your uncanny gifts, you would long since have been sealed up in a tree by a druid priest! How could you have known about Reynaud's belt?"

"Tut!" said Holbrook, though I suspected he was inwardly gratified. "You know my methods. Describe the belt, please."

"It was made of heavy black leather, fully three inches wide, with four belt loops of brass, two in front and two in back. The loops were badly twisted in the fall."

"M'm, yes. And there is no doubt about the victim's identity?"

Michel Guilloux entered at that moment and paused to mop the perspiration from his forehead with an enormous blue handkerchief. "No doubt whatever, monsieur, though the fall made poor Emile almost unrecognizable." He shook his head. "There is an unhealthy fear abroad in our village. They talk of setting up patrols to keep watch at night."

"That will hardly be necessary," said Holbrook. "I feel certain you have heard the last of this laughing devil of yours."

I found myself staring at Holbrook with mouth agape. "Does that mean you have found the answer to these riddles?"

"It may never be possible to establish the truth of this case with exactitude, my dear Wilson, but I fancy my hypothesis will explain all the known facts. Come; let us pay our overdue respects to Mlle. de Gouarec's tea-tray, and I shall save myself the trouble of explaining the matter twice over. Come along, M. Varagnac, M. Guilloux; we depend upon you to relay the information to all interested parties."

"AS IT SO OFTEN HAPPENS," SAID HOLBROOK, when we were gathered round the tea table in the baron's library, "it was an observation by my friend Wilson that suggested a possible answer to this mystery."

"An observation of mine?" I ejaculated.

"Just so. You speculated, upon seeing the aeronautical paraphernalia in Reynaud's workshop, whether a flying machine might be in-

volved in the murderous assault on the baron —”

“And you pooh-poohed the idea!”

“I did — and do, if we are thinking of a machine of the noisy and cumbersome type that presently exists in the heavier-than-air category. But something else had already drawn my attention to Reynaud. No Frenchman has chops and peas for breakfast, yet these seemed to comprise his last meal. The inference is that he did not eat his breakfast at home and that, indeed, he was engaged in some activity which kept him too occupied to tidy up after his evening meal of the night before. Then I remarked upon the inordinate amount of glue he appeared to be using in his constructions. This afternoon, in questioning the drayman who travels between here and Quimper, I learned that several months ago Reynaud took delivery of a great quantity of oiled silk.”

“Silk? Glue?” interrupted Anne de Gouarec in bewilderment. “What can that mean?”

“It means a balloon, mademoiselle, made of panels of silk coated with elastic glue to make it airtight. A century ago, the history books tell us, there was a balloon mania here in France, and considerable skill was developed in their construction and handling. Today, though interest has shifted to heavier-than-air machines or powered balloons, free balloons are used primarily for scientific inquiries. But as a student of French aeronautics, the idea of using a balloon must have suggested itself to Reynaud as soon as he conceived the idea of murdering your father, mademoiselle.”

“But I thought Reynaud was another victim,” protested Ledgerwood.

“Circumstances conspired to give us that impression,” said Holbrook. “Yet it is certain that Reynaud began his balloon months ago, perhaps shortly after the baron humiliated him at that lecture.

“Reynaud was aware of two all-important factors: the baron’s invariable walk along the beach before retiring, and the local phenomenon of the twilight wind — that breeze which springs up in late evening and, funneled between the headlands, travels up the beach from the south. His comprehensive notes on this phenomenon enabled him to utilize it to his own advantage. If we could reconstruct the sequence of events, we should no doubt find that Reynaud made several trial runs, on one of which he was lucky enough to come upon Louis making his drunken way home. Carefully releasing hot air from the balloon (which he filled, incidentally, by burning straw in his workshop stove), he descended upon Louis, sent him sprawling with a blow and, quickly dropping some of the sand he carried as ballast, disap-

peared into the dark night. Small wonder poor Louis thought he'd been set-upon by devils! Small wonder that Reynaud couldn't help breaking into triumphant laughter at his success!

"Then he had only to wait for another moonless night to put his plan into action. Picture if you will the excitement with which he dons his homemade leather harness, loads one of his pistols and commences the process of filling the balloon. Eleven o'clock strikes; he knows that de Gouarec will be setting out. Eleven-fifteen; and de Gouarec will be on the beach. The breeze is soft; the distended balloon tugs at its mooring rope. At length all is ready — Reynaud releases the rope and away he soars!

"Trailing from the balloon," Holbrook continued, "is what is known as a guide rope, intended to keep the balloon at a fairly constant altitude. When the balloon sinks, the rope trails on the ground — leaving those lightly traced lines to which I called your attention — then, relieved of the weight of the rope, the balloon tends to rise until the rope's weight pulls it down again, and so on. Thus Reynaud stalks his prey, silently as an owl after a hare. Against the black sky, his dark clothing makes him invisible — and why should the baron look for danger from above? — while the baron himself is silhouetted against the white sand, not an impossible target even on so dark a night.

"Yet something alarms de Gouarec. Perhaps it is the click of Reynaud's pistol; perhaps a sixth sense of impending danger. He whirls, drawing his sword-cane, but too late! Reynaud is upon him, an apparition striking literally like a bolt from the blue! He fires, and the baron falls lifeless! But at the moment of victory the unexpected happens. De Gouarec's sword-stroke misses Reynaud, but severs the control cord which enables him to release hot air from the balloon in order to descend. In the excitement, Reynaud probably doesn't notice this at once, for he dumps some of his sand ballast — we saw the splotch of reddish sand, similar to that about his cottage, near the baron's body — and rises into the air.

"Then he makes the shocking discovery that he cannot descend! He is carried high over the sleeping village, where his despairing, half-hysterical screams are heard by Wilson and myself, among others. Still, one chance remains. The breeze is carrying him toward the northern headland, and the balloon is commencing to drop as the air within cools. Reynaud finds the ground rising to meet him and, flinging away his now-useless pistol, makes frantic efforts to free himself from his harness. He strikes the ground, but the updraft over the headland forces the balloon up the hill, dragging Reynaud off his feet, through briar and bramble, ever closer to the precipice. At last the

final strap is loosened, but a fraction of a second too late! Reynaud clutches at the cliff edge in vain, and plummets to his death on the jagged rocks below whilst the balloon, now freed of his weight, soars again into the night and disappears forever over the ocean!"

"WHAT A BIZARRE PLAN OF REVENGE!" SAID I, as Holbrook and I prepared to take our leave of St. Guenole on the following morning.

"But one that had every chance of success, barring one lucky stroke of a sword-cane," Holbrook replied. "Reynaud knew the psychology of his neighbors, and surmised that the baron's death would doubtless have been laid to some supernatural agency. In any case, I have occasionally observed a certain lack of official enthusiasm for delving too deeply into the death of a man as unpopular as Baron de Gouarec!"

"Then it was doubly fortunate that you happened to be on the scene," I exclaimed. "Your reconstruction was nothing short of brilliant!"

"Elementary, my dear W —!" Holbrook murmured.

"Aha!" I cried in triumph. "You owe me one franc!"

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAKERS

YURI PRIZEL (*Learn Murder by Mail*) tells us:

I am 33 years old. Born in the USSR. Came to the U.S. when I was 16, learned some English and decided to try my hand at writing. This is my first mystery story. I have a Master's degree in literature (for fun), and a Bachelor's in engineering (for bread and butter).

PETER NOTIER (*All Summer Long*) writes:

I teach high school English and spend ten months of the year reading other people's writing. I find mythological themes and characters fascinating. I'm 34, have a wife, and two sons who are just old enough to begin appreciating the thrills of amusement parks.

It had taken years of wandering, always moving, with never a way out. I had learned to cope with loneliness, and hunger was never a problem. I would be all right here!

All Summer Long

by PETER NOTIER

THE AMUSEMENT PARK WAS A DIFFICULT PLACE TO BE for someone who was alone and hungry. The spring air off the lake chilled the midway beneath the empty sky and tossed wrappers about that had been left lying around since Labor Day. The gulls and squirrels had long since scavenged any scraps of food that were to be found. A thin grey haze seemed to fill the air, ghosts of the people who should have been there; but it was difficult to tell whether the haze was in the air or in my imagination. Beach sand drifted across the concrete between the rides standing idle. The painted-on smiles of the carousel horses seemed forced as they waited uncertainly for the children to come

again. Their large eyes searched the grounds expectantly for riders, and their ears strained forward for the echoes of laughter that had been carried off across the lake by the storms of winter. Only the surf could be heard now, its lonely sound pounding across the midway in the chill spring air off the lake.

"Hey there, you fella — you lookin' for somebody or you lookin' for trouble? We ain't open here yet. How'd you get in here?"

The barker's voice was right for the place, and as I turned around, I expected to see a fat little man in a straw hat and plaid coat, smoking a foul cheap cigar, not the brown-suited old man bent over a cane who confronted me there in the midway.

"I've come looking for work."

"Speak up; don't grunt at me. I couldn't understand a thing you said."

I cleared my throat. It had been so long since I'd spoken with anyone that I'd forgotten what my voice must sound like to someone else.

"I've come looking for work."

"We open in two weeks. Jobs are pretty much filled. Big, strong fella like you ought to be working at the mill."

"I can't stand the heat. I need to work where it's cool and dark."

"Oh?" He didn't pursue it. "Well, I've got nothing for you."

"You'll need a replacement for George Lubbock."

"George? You're right. How'd you know about George? Terrible what those punks did to him. Police said it looked like he'd been gored by a Brahma bull. How'd you know about George?"

"I read the obituaries. Somebody dies and needs to be replaced. They're better than the want ads sometimes."

"I guess so. I do need a replacement for George. Why do you want his job?"

"It's cool. It's dark. I get terrible headaches if it's too hot or too bright. My head just throbs right here on the side, like this." I pounded the sides of my head with my fists.

"Okay, you don't have to knock yourself out. Looks like you been bumped there quite a few times as it is. Come on down to the office and fill out some papers."

THE OFFICE WAS LOCATED ABOVE ONE OF THE CONCESSION stands. Just the thought of crowds standing there eating hot dogs and smelling of popcorn made the hunger worse. I would have to control it to get the job.

"From here I can see the whole park. Don't get around too easy any more. All I have to do if I see trouble is call security. But they don't

start for another week yet. Just the night man in the off season. Sure you wouldn't want to work security? Pay's better. Fella like you must eat a lot. Food's not cheap any more."

"George's job will be fine. I would be fed well enough if I got the job."

"Okay, you've got to fill this out."

"I—I don't write very well. Never had the time to learn."

"That why you've been keeping your hands jammed in your pockets? Or you got a gun? I've got no money here."

"Just cold, just cold. I'm not used to being near the lake."

"All right. You won't be the only one around here can't write. But I thought you said you read the obituaries. Most people can't write can't read either. Just tell me what I need to know and I'll fill it in."

THE OLD MAN WAS PERCEPTIVE BUT NOT CURIOUS. Telling him I'd met George Lubbock at a bar and not in the obituaries might have made him curious. Telling him what he wanted to know for the job application was as embarrassing as telling him I couldn't write. Most of it was routine information, but some of it seemed uncalled for, and I didn't care to talk about it.

"Father's name?"

"Why do you need to know?"

"You want this job? Father's name."

"I don't know."

"Don't matter to me. Mother's name?"

"Pasiphae." I should have lied.

"Pass — what?"

"Pasiphae. We're from Crete originally. It's an old name there."

"Crete. Near Monee, in Illinois, isn't it?"

"It's an island — south of Greece."

"You American? Now, I mean? I don't want any trouble. That's why I've got to ask about family. Try to get these things out in the open in case anybody comes asking. People from the government come around places like this a lot asking questions about drifters. You can't be more'n seventeen."

"Actually, I'm quite a bit older. Nineteen." I thought I'd said nineteen when he asked.

"Right, nineteen. That's what you said earlier."

He was trying to trip me up. But he was only curious where his own well-being might be jeopardized. That was good.

"You American?"

"Yes, American. For quite some time now."

IT HAD TAKEN YEARS OF WANDERING, BUT YES, I WAS American now. Crete to Athens to Rome, Aachen, Florence, Madrid, Paris, Vienna, London, Berlin. Always moving, all those years and places and never a way out of year after year and place after place. There had been a chance near the beginning, but I was younger and stronger and had played dead then. I had learned to cope with the loneliness, and the hunger was never a problem. Then. And for now I was an American.

"I've got to see some I.D."

Luckily I had worn gloves, but I had a hard time opening the wallet I'd found. I had found out about the papers and knew the identity of Robert Earl Fremdling by heart.

"This is your current address?"

"No — I just moved. I'm living at a hotel on Hudson Street."

"Not a nice neighborhood."

"I need to get my feet on the ground."

"Where you live is none of my business, long as you do your job. Sign here and be back day before Memorial Day so somebody can set you up."

I had to distract him while I signed and called his attention to a freighter out on the lake. I had to prop the pen between both gloves as I wrote the name.

"My son went to work on one of those black ships. Almost drowned when it broke up on Lake Superior in '72. But he won't come to work for me. He's a first mate now. Sails on the Medusa Challenger out of Cleveland. You're right. You don't write too good." But he didn't bother to check the signature against the one on the I.D. I'd given him.

Medusa Challenger, an ugly old cement boat, hardly worthy of the name. But Medusa had been stupid. He wanted to shake hands, but I was already fumbling with the door.

IT HAD GROWN WARMER IN THE LATE AFTERNOON as the sun sank below the clouds, shining directly now across the lake through the framework of the old, wooden roller coaster on the beach and casting a labyrinth of shadows across the midway. The carousel horses seemed to bare their teeth and flare their nostrils at me as I walked past. I snorted brusquely at them and left the park. Not since the Germans had set me up in my own cellar with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of victims had I felt so certain of being satisfied. The Tunnel of Love would be cool and dark and would send me a steady supply of the city's young all summer long.

Most editors are human and can sympathize with the problems of budding authors. The editor of a mystery magazine is no exception!

Learn Murder By Mail

by YURI PRIZEL

DEAR MR. PORTMAN:

Thank you for letting us see "The Broke Polygamist." Unfortunately, in its present form the story does not satisfy our editorial requirements. The plot is interesting and original, but not enough attention is paid to details. One example: when Carlos enters Janice's penthouse, he must get past the doorman, the elevator boy, and several servants. How does he manage to avoid being noticed? This is a very important point which must be clarified if you want your story to make sense. Remember, in a mystery plot nothing should be left to chance.

Despite such shortcomings, I believe that the story has potential and should not be abandoned. If you think you can fix it up, I shall be glad to look at it again.

George Blaubleier,
Editor

DEAR MR. PORTMAN:

Thank you for resubmitting "The Broke Polygamist." I am happy to see that you were able to solve the problem of Carlos' entering the penthouse. This improved your story a great deal, but there are still a few weak spots left. For instance, why should Linda agree so readily to go boating with Carlos? They are divorced, he is behind on his alimony, and she suspects him of having killed Janice to get out of paying alimony to *her*. I do not think that an invitation "to see the sunset" would be persuasive enough in this case. Try to come up with something more convincing, then show me the story again. I still think it has potential.

George Blaubleier

P. S. No, Stan, I don't mind it at all if you share your personal problems with me. Popular opinion notwithstanding, most editors are both human and humane and can sympathize with their fellow men — including budding authors. Yes, I understand how alimony payments can mess up your budget — I am paying to three ex-wives myself! The only advice I can give you is grin and bear it, the way I've been doing these past twelve years. And keep polishing that story — I like it!

G. B.

DEAR STAN:

"The Polygamist" looks better and better. The way you disposed of Janice's body was superb — I haven't seen such an original method in a long time. Too bad I cannot say the same about Linda's death. Making it appear a suicide just won't hold water (forgive the pun). Even a city cop would not believe that a woman would try to drown herself twenty miles from shore *after* slashing her wrists. I am sure you can see the improbability of this. You must rewrite this part.

G. B.

P. S. Sorry to hear about your predicament. The same thing happened to me once. Not only was my salary attached, but the Sheriff sold my sailboat — I owed a year's alimony to one wife and six months' child support to the second. Worse than either you or your character Carlos, huh? Really, it is a shame. Still, don't let this interfere with your writing. Keep ironing out the wrinkles in that story — it's worth the effort.

G. B.

DEAR STAN:

I think we are getting there. "The Polygamist" seems to be almost ready. Only a couple of minor touches are needed to make it really good. First — find a better way to do away with Lois. The way Carlos dealt with Janice and then with Linda establishes him (or, rather, you) as a clever, imaginative character. I am sure you will be able to find something more ingenious than to have Lois supposedly eaten by a shark. Who ever heard of sharks off Long Island, anyway? Clean it up, Stan. I know you can do it. Look at how easily you solved a similar problem with Linda. Also, try and see what you can do with Carlos'

alibi. The one you have is not very convincing. Considering what he has done — dispatched three ex-wives in less than two weeks — the alibi should be air- and water- and everything-else-tight to keep him off the hook. Do that and I am sure the story will be ready for publication. So hurry up — I know you need the money.

G. B.

DEAR MR. PORTMAN:

We were sincerely sorry to hear about your misfortune, but we fail to see how it concerns us. A burglary should be reported to the police, not to the editors of a magazine — not even a mystery magazine. We agree that it is strange that the burglar should take your files and manuscripts while leaving behind the stereo and the TV; we might even suggest that there is a possible seed of a nice mystery plot there, but we fail to see how we can be of any assistance.

As for your claim that we now have in our possession the only existing copy of your story "The Broke Polygamist," we wish to inform you that the most careful search of our files failed to produce the said manuscript.

Again, we wish to express our sympathy.

George Blaubleier,
Editor

"...AND NOW FOR THE LOCAL NEWS.

"Police have established a definite connection among the three women found murdered in the past ten days. All three were at one time married to George Blaubleier, a noted writer and editor of a mystery magazine. It also seems that on the night one of the women, Ms. Callish, was murdered, a man answering the general description of Mr. Blaubleier was seen in the vicinity of her house. However, for the past two weeks Mr. Blaubleier has been attending a conference of mystery writers in London, which gives him a solid alibi in this matter. When asked to comment on the murders, Mr. Blaubleier replied: 'One learns to cope with any situation.'

"A man's body was found hanging in a rooming house at 125 Waterfront Avenue last night. He has been identified as Stanley Portman. Pending further investigation the death has been ruled as suicide. A rather baffling note was found in Mr. Portman's room. All it said was: 'Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.' What was Mr. Portman trying to say in this last message is anybody's guess.

"And that's all for tonight, listeners. Good night." •

They beat him senseless and dragged him back to his windowless cell to reconsider. But he wouldn't talk. He vowed that. He wouldn't talk no matter what they did to him!

The Movement

by JAY FOX

A NAKED, FLY-SPECKED BULB FLICKERED and flashed on, flooding the cramped cell with its pallid glare. Roul blinked and yawned, wrenching by the gleam from fitful sleep and nightmare replays of his most recent interrogation.

He turned on his aching side and dragged himself up from the thin, foul-smelling pad on the metal bunk. There he sat, leaning breathless against the damp stone dungeon wall. Both his thumbnails had been ripped out and the tender flesh beneath seared by the glowing head of Colonel Markos' long black cigar.

The windowless underground cell measured a scant four by eight. With the bunk and a wooden bucket he used as a toilet, there was barely room left to turn around. Beyond the heavily barred steel door he could see nothing but a narrow hall and another blank wall of damp stone. They had him in The Pit, deep in the rocky bowels of the old Colonial Prison, and for five days Roul had not seen the sun.

The barred cell door clanked open and a pot-bellied guard appeared; his soiled, sweat-stained uniform shirt already limp from muggy tropic heat above. "Good morning!" the jailer said with a crooked grin.

"And how is our noble revolutionary this fine day?"

"Shove it!" Roul said as strongly as he could.

Now the jailer chuckled, amused by his insolence — but the first day, when he'd felt stronger, the guard had beaten him with a club until Roul fell helpless at his feet.

"Breakfast," he announced grandly, offering Roul a steaming wooden bowl of tasteless slop.

"You can shove that, too. I'm not hungry."

"But you must eat to maintain your strength. Time is getting short, and the Colonel's interrogation will be more severe. The cook has even put a cup of raisins in your porridge." He thrust the bowl into Roul's quaking hands. "At least they *look* like raisins..." Then he laughed.

"...but some of them have legs."

Roul glowered in disgust and dumped the soggy mush in the wooden toilet bucket. "That's what I think of your porridge . . . and of your Colonel."

The jailer shook his head and gave him another gap-toothed grin. "You're lucky I'm in such a good mood this morning. Otherwise I'd make you eat from that bucket."

Roul slumped and muttered sullenly, "The flavor could only be improved..."

IT WAS AN HOUR LATER, HE GUESSED, when the guard returned. They'd taken his watch, and without a window to glimpse the sun it was hard to keep track of time. But it was getting warmer. Contrary to the laws of physics, damp tropic heat sank deep, even to the rock-walled intestines of The Pit. By mid-day it would hang over him like a sweaty blanket.

"Colonel Markos will see you now," the guard said with a chilling smile. "And I hope today you tell him what he wants to hear. If not — if you remain stubborn despite his...ah, *persuasion* — I've been told I'll have to clean this stinking cell for the next prisoner."

"Do a good job," Roul told him. "I shall say nothing. The attack will come as planned; the revolution will succeed, and it is *you* who will be in here next. You and Markos together. My friend will see to it...and my ghost will laugh."

"What a brave and foolish man you are. The rebel forces will be mowed down like weeds whether you talk or not."

"Don't be so sure. You might have to eat your words...and all the *raisins* swimming in that bucket."

THE BLANK, FEATURELESS WALLS OF INTERROGATION ROOM

Two were a soft and cool looking shade of green. The floor was oak, waxed and gleaming mirror-bright — a pleasant change from the harsh hospital white and blood-spattered concrete of Room One where Roul had been taken all the times before.

“Why the change?” he asked suspiciously.

Markos smiled from behind a bare metal desk. That and two soft chairs were the only furniture in the room. “Because our more forceful measures have so far achieved nothing,” he said with disarming frankness. “This morning I want to reason with you.”

“I’d sooner try to reason with a coiled snake.”

Colonel Markos grinned condescendingly and said, “Sit down,” motioning him to the empty leather chair. Before, they’d strapped him in a high-backed, steel-framed throne of torture.

Roul seated himself, glancing briefly at the two tan uniformed men from Internal Security who flanked the door, each with a Russian-made machine pistol slung near his right hip. That hadn’t changed.

Markos leaned back and steepled his fingers beneath his chin. “The young man Diego who was arrested with you...he has told us the attack will come tomorrow, at dawn on the 28th....”

Roul winced uncontrollably. The torture had weakened him and without thinking he’d confirmed the time and day when the rebels planned to strike the capitol.

“Unfortunately, Diego was not so strong as you. He died before being able to tell us the direction from which the main thrust is to come.”

“If I knew I wouldn’t tell you,” Roul said, showing deep remorse for the little he’d given away already.

“You know, and you will tell me,” Markos said firmly. “To spare your comrades.”

“Spare them?” Roul laughed bitterly.

“Yes,” Markos insisted. “There are four mountain passes the rebels might use to reach the capitol. If we know which one, they will be met in force. The battle will be brief, with few casualties on either side. If we must divide our federal troops, it will take longer to crush the rebellion, and many more of your people will die.”

“If you divide your forces, one group will be quickly overrun...the other three struck suddenly from behind. The revolution will succeed. Freedom will be won.”

“But El Presidente gave us freedom when he vanquished the colonial imperialists —”

“He gave us a new tyranny to replace the old. He and his Swiss bank accounts grow fat while the peasants starve.”

"But *you* are no peasant, Roul. You are a scholar, a university professor. If you turned your learned mind to helping El Presidente, he'd find a rewarding niche for you...perhaps as Minister of Culture."

"I prefer The Pit and my dream of freedom."

"A dream, Roul. That's all it is. A foolish dream. This movement of yours...that ragged band of misfits hasn't a chance."

Roul smiled stiffly. "They must have something, or you would not be so anxious to know which pass they plan to use."

"North, south, east or west. It doesn't really matter,"

"Oh, then am I free to go?"

Markos glared. "No, you are not *free* to do anything. You will *never* be free...except in the service of El Presidente."

"I prefer The Pit. I'll 'teach my raisins to do the back-stroke...'"

Colonel Markos motioned for the guards. "Take him to Room One!"

GENERAL TALLEMONTES ENTERED THE ROOM as soon as Roul had been ushered out. A look of deep concern lined his flushed and puffy face. "Markos, are you certain this will work? Time is running out."

The Colonel smiled, his lips hard and wet, his mouth like a crack in a block of ice. "I'm certain," he said. "Remember, time is running faster for Roul than it is for us. By manipulating the light and heat in The Pit we've shaved six hours off each day he'd been here. He thinks it's around noon on the 27th, we know it's the 26th. By nightfall we'll have convinced him it's dawn on the 28th, that the attack has been launched, and there is no longer a need for him to remain silent. They do that with hens, you know, work the lights on and off to make them think the days are passing quickly. They average an egg a day, even when their days are condensed to 18 hours."

"But Roul is smarter than a chicken. If he knows — if he even *suspects* you're tampering with the passage of time — he will remain silent. Or worse, he might lie and send all our troops to the wrong pass."

"No," Markos assured him. "We've thought of everything. His meals have been sparse, so he is still hungry, even on his abbreviated schedule. And, luckily, he has a full beard —"

"What does that have to do with it?"

Markos smiled slyly. "A clean-shaven man might wonder why he awoke with less than the usual growth of stubble, but a man with a flowing beard can't keep such close track. Roul has no way to count the hours we've stolen from him. When he hears the performance I've arranged with *Theatro Nationale*, he will jabber freely in plenty of time

for you to arrange an ambush at the right pass."

"I hope so," Tallemontes said. "For your sake, Colonel. I don't like thinking what Roul and the rebels would do to you if our efforts should fail...."

THEY BEAT ROUL SENSELESS AND DRAGGED HIM BACK to the false darkness of his cell. A few hours later he awoke, writhing in a sea of pain, startled by the distant rattle of gunfire.

He felt a chill and saw the first light of dawn filtering down the stoney corridor outside his cell. From above, he heard the rumble of rubber padded tracks and the snort of diesel exhaust as El Presidente's armored personnel carriers raced this way and that in apparent confusion. With their somber rhythm came the staccato crackle of automatic weapons growing louder with each burst. Roul's heart thundered with the approaching sound of battle, and he let out a joyous whoop!

Colonel Markos appeared suddenly outside the cell door, his eyes narrow with hatred and ablaze with seething fury. Two tan uniformed guards pressed near and aimed their stubby machine pistols through the bars. "You are no longer of any use to us," Markos said. "Your rebels have overrun our scattered defenses. They've taken the palace...the prison will fall next."

Roul smiled stiffly despite the racking pain. "At least now you know. East, Colonel. EAST. Freedom comes with the rising sun."

Markos gave a signal with his hand. Roul shrank back, expecting the guns to blaze and shred his heaving chest, but the sound of battle stopped abruptly. A soft-hiss of static-filled the hall. The icy-slit of the Colonel's lips curved slightly and he said, "Thank you, Roul. That's what I've been waiting to hear."

He sagged against the wall, stunned by the chilling silence. "You tricked me," he gasped weakly in a voice both angry and sick with realization.

"Yes," Markos said, widening his cruel grin. "You've lost track of time, Roul. We still have 24 hours to arrange a deadly ambush." Then he laughed. "You're no harder to fool than an old hen. Too bad you don't lay eggs."

Roul gave an anguished moan and slammed his head against the wall. There, with his face well hidden, a knowing grin slowly curled his lips.

AT EXPECTED, THE ATTACK CAME AT DAWN the next day. From the west. The well trained rebel force quickly seized the almost

defenseless capitol and ran up the backs of startled federal troops massed with their artillery at the mouth of the narrow canyon east of the city.

"You knew," Markos growled sullenly, his raging frustration restrained by stiff leather straps on a steel chair in Interrogation Room One.

"I suspected," Roul said. "Your shortened days deceived my mind; it was the power of the movement you failed to reckon with."

"The movement . . ." Markos spat the last word bitterly. "That's a bunch of crap!"

"Yes, literally," Roul said with a smile. "When I was flown into exile, I gained six hours by the clock. But for over a week my bowels held stubbornly to their accustomed early morning schedule, even though that was then the middle of night. When the same thing happened in my cell, I guessed what you were trying to do."

Markos muttered a curse and squirmed uncomfortably in the steel chair. Roul said, "Get used to it, Colonel. You and I are going to have a long talk. But first you must excuse me. I have to use the bathroom." •

MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAKERS

PHILLIP STERLING (*A Singular Fascination*)

is a survivor of the writing programs of Centre College, Central Michigan University, and Bowling Green State University. He has published his poetry and fiction in a number of magazines. Currently a teacher of creative writing and poetry at Keuka College in upstate New York, he lives on a hill with his wife and two children.

FRANCIS M. NEVINS, JR. (*The Garrulous Garrity Grand Scam*) says:

My most recent work in hardcover is "The Poet of the Shadows," an introductory essay on Cornell Woolrich, which will appear in a collection of Woolrich's fantasy and horror fiction to be published by Southern Illinois University Press.

To anyone else, it isn't much, but to me it's a nightmare of my past, like a Halloween mask one finds in the attic that still sends rivers of chills down my back. And I lay awake in the night, waiting, fearing the horror that might descend upon me at any instant!

A Singular Fascination

by PHILLIP STERLING

AS HE HAD EVERY OTHER SATURDAY MORNING for the past eighteen months, P. sat in the second booth from the window of the Near Water Cafe on Jefferson Avenue glancing through the *Free Press* and drinking coffee. A half-eaten danish like a sleep-laden eye looked up at him from a round white paper plate. There wasn't much news to speak of: the Tigers had dropped a twi-night doubleheader the night before; Mayor Young was in Atlanta for a mayoral convention; two men and a woman were found shot "through the head" in an Eastside apartment, "apparently drug related." P., after skimming the comics and *Parade* magazine, much in the fog of his own half-wakefulness, folded the paper into its original shape and set it on the formica top beyond his half-empty cup. Reading this gesture as a signal, the fleshy black waitress, wearing a red-and-white checkerboard apron and an Afro the size of a fully inflated basketball, shuffled

over to the booth and, smileless and silently, refilled the cup to the brim. "Thanks," P. mumbled, as he had every other Saturday morning.

The cafe was no Holiday Inn, but it was clean, and, more importantly, it was quiet. Six booths guarded the length of the west wall, three tables braved a no-man's-land in the center of the room, and eleven stools screwed to the floor stood like a police barricade in front of the counter, behind which were the coffee machines, the grills, the pies in their plastic space suits, and the years-old bromo seltzer displays. P.'s glance wandered around the room. Other than himself, only two black men were customers. It was quiet and he felt pleasantly contented. The weekend lay ahead like a great unopened gift, no pressing business interposed, and he had a date arranged with a legal assistant uptown for the evening. Perhaps dinner, a dance, his place. P. felt that his life, for an unmarried man of twenty-nine, was as stable and as routine as he had always hoped it would someday be.

At 9:17 a.m. — he had been looking at the clock above the door when it swung open — another white man entered the coffeeshop. Although at first there didn't appear to be anything unusual about the man — mid-forties, longish newsprint-colored hair, mustache, work clothes, tennis shoes — when the man turned to give Gary the counterman a take-out order, P. noticed the scar. Instead of his half-raised cup completing the journey to his lips, it clacked to the saucer, slopping over.

SOMETHING FRIGHTENING AND TEMPORARILY FORGOTTEN was called into P.'s memory. The sight nauseated and exhilarated him; it broke into painful and violently repressed recollections of another acquaintance — a man he hadn't thought about for several years, but who he'd never completely forgot.

Not that there was a physical resemblance. The man at the counter awaiting his order in no way mirrored the facial image that smiled before P.'s mind-eye. It was the scar that drew his attention. On the left side of the take-out man's head, where the ear should have hung like a banner, there was nothing but a ragged slice of bright red scar tissue and a small hole. Although the man's hair partially covered it, it was nonetheless unmistakable — the ear had been removed.

Had it been by accident? Coincidence? Or had it been . . . ? He picked up his check and slid out of the booth, leaving the newspaper laid limply upon the table. At the register, standing nearer the new arrival, he looked again — yes, cleanly and simply, the man's ear had been razored. The sweat that suddenly cooled P.'s forehead surprised

him. Had it been an accident the face would be marred — automobile, industrial, fire — each left indications. P. had to know for sure.

"Have we met before?" he said to the man whose coffee, pale with cream, burped through the air holes in the plastic covered styrofoam cup on the counter.

The man turned a smiling, flawless face toward P., eyed him carefully, and said, "I don't think so."

"A friend of a mutual friend perhaps?"

"Not that I recall."

"Do you know Markus Durreck?" P. pronounced the name carefully, at the same time searching the man's face for any change of expression.

The man shook his head slowly, back and forth, as if tossing names or faces onto a screen of his memory. With each pass, P. couldn't avoid staring at the earless left side of the face. "No," the man said.

"Four, five years ago in Paris?"

"Never been to Paris," the man replied. "Sorry." He paid, thanked Gary behind the register, and left. P. stood pale and open-mouthed at the shutter-click of the closing door, his money and bill clutched in his sweat-warmed fist. Gary said, "You okay?"

It was not enough for P. The scar was clean, carefully made. He had to find out where the man lost his ear. But when he ran out into the sunlight prepared to hail the man, there was no white man in sight.

FROM WHERE I NOW SIT AT MY DESK IN THE SPARE BED-room-turned-study, behind a locked door — that is how I objectify the incident yesterday morning. To anyone else, it isn't much really. But to me, it's a nightmare of my past I have never outgrown. It's like a Halloween mask one finds in the attic, stored away, that still sends rivers of chills down one's back. The sight of that earless man exploded into memories of a time and a man I have tried hard to forget. But who haunts me even now.

In 1973-74 I lived in Paris, in a small hotel facing the Place de l'Odeon. Why I resided those two years in France is really of no concern here, but let me just say that it dealt with the overseas sales of certain American automobiles. The job was, for a rising young sales representative, another rung on the ladder; a promotion and promise of more promotions upon my return to the States went with the job. So I spent the better part of a year underground, riding the metro, webbing the city in a mesh of my sales pitches. After a time, the stations all began to look the same to me, excluding the touristy ones like the one

near the Louvre, where glass cases exhibit welcome signs for the confused or lost *americain*. That is why it is now difficult for me to pinpoint the exact metro station where I first encountered Markus Durreck. I do, however, recollect that it was early, that I was on my way to an appointment out of the city, because I never reached the Gare du Nord, nor my day's destinations. I was mesmerized and somewhat ruffled by my engagement with Monsieur Durreck. I imagine the station was either along St. Michel or St. Germain, near my hotel.

What kind of a day it was, I don't recall either. The weather in the underground was mostly the same, damp and muggy in the summer, damp and frosty in the winter. We did meet in winter, I'm sure. And in winter, Paris is a grey, wet, and clammy-frosted corpse. I wore a double-breasted wool, knee-length overcoat, a scarf from Scotland, and a conservative grey suit. I no longer have the suit or coat, but the scarf is still somewhere in my possession. It is a souvenir from a trip I had made to Aberdeen, where my ancestors once lived. I'm sure I didn't wear a hat — I've always despised hats.

My hands I imagine were thrust deep into the overcoat's pockets. Again, I can't be sure of course. But I often still bury them that way — I seldom wear gloves and, an introvert at best, I like the aesthetic warmth of tight, closed forms. I was awaiting the whine of the rubber-tired train when I felt an uncomfortable nearness of another human planet, a violation, so to speak, of my air space. There seemed to be a shuffle of feet to my right; I assumed it was another early commuter. When I casually glanced around I saw to my left only a dozen or so passengers anticipating the arrival of the mole-like train; they were spread out deliciously, isolated individuals. But to my right stood a man as if we were together, he and I an arm's length away. I side-stepped slightly and looked up the dark tunnel for the train's yellow eye. Nothing. I looked down at my feet.

WHEN I MOVED, THE MAN MOVED ALSO, as if tethered to me by an invisible string. I avoided looking in his direction, hoping the train would soon arrive and release me from any mollycoddle obligations. Nevertheless, he spoke. For weeks after that initial meeting, I was to repeat the strange conversation to myself, until it took on an almost liturgic importance, became a litany. The new and licorice flavor of Durreck's words tasted bitter to me at first, then as the encounters became more often and more certain, they became mellow and sweet. In the end, they turned putrid. Still, they now come to me newly fresh and alive, and I can record them faithfully, almost perfectly.

"Pardon," said the man. "*Etes-vous américain?*"

"*Oui*," I said, and then, for the first time, I took a good hard look at my soon to be bedeviling acquaintance. He was probably of Middle Eastern or North African descent — very dark, even in winter, with unctuous skin, thick black hair, and eyebrows as bushy as a small squirrel's tail. Probably recently shaven, his chin and jowls were already dark with stubble. He was a couple inches shorter than my six foot height, he had a fuller build — heavy, but not obese — and he was fashionably dressed. Whereas the collars of Europeans often were salted with dandruff, his was spotless; yet, it wasn't as if he had recently bathed. In the corner of his left eye, a crisp coal of sleep hung revealingly.

His eyes. His eyes were an odd green color — pale and light like the cross-section of a lime — and oddly distant from the darkness of his face. They were the near-clear vacuums of his stare. He said "*Bonjour.*" Then, in English, "I thought so." There was a trace of an accent, but what kind of an accent was indecipherable to me.

"Yes," I repeated in English, at a loss for small talk.

"I was looking at your ear," he said. "You have a wonderfully perfect ear for an American."

I was somewhat taken aback. I must have mumbled "Thanks" or something.

"Ears have always held for me a singular fascination and significant beauty," he continued. His eyes looked off over my shoulder, as if he was lost in thought, delivering a preplanned soliloquy. "I guess I'm sort of an ear specialist — no, not an audiologist or doctor — an ear aesthetician of sorts. Does that surprise you?"

It did, but I didn't, I remember, know what to say. Probably: "I don't know, I . . ."

"Pardon," he interrupted. "I'm Markus Durreck." As we shook hands, I realized that my hand was limp and that his grasp held only my fingers. I felt effeminate and was embarrassed. "We seem to have something in common," he said, gesturing toward the name of the automobile company on the slim briefcase under my arm. (A detail I just recalled.) "I'm, *comment dites-vous*, an oil representative for several South African nations."

"Oh," I said. "It's nice to meet you." There was the sound of a train in the tunnel, a ringing of bells or something, and the gates behind us closed. The doors of the cars whooshed open and we stepped into a nearly vacant car. The lack of a crowd in which to hide or to escape from my unwanted friend was disconcerting; the emptiness was ominous.

We stood, although many of the seats were unoccupied. Durreck continued: "How long are you in Paris?"

I told him.

"Perhaps we can have coffee someday? Lunch perhaps? I'm in and out of Paris often. Where are you staying?"

I told him.

"Great!" he said. Then, as we pulled into the next station, "I'll be in touch." The doors whooshed and he was on the platform; they whooshed closed and he smiled — unusually white teeth, like ceramic — and called back, "Wonderful ears!" And was gone.

FOR THE REST OF THE RIDE AND BEYOND — since I rode past my stop and missed the appointment — I berated myself for falling into such an uncomfortable situation. As I've said before, an introvert of sorts, I don't care to perpetuate close friendships. Nor do I like being sucked into one's hurly-burly of acquaintances. I like distance, I fear obligations. I couldn't believe that I had so easily acquiesced to a stranger's interrogation, that I had been benumbed by the man's completely aggressive assertions. Or had it been something else that riled me? He had mentioned ears; his curious introduction reverberated in my head: "Ears have always held for me a singular fascination . . ." Had I been accosted by a madman? Did I freely release my domiciliary data to a crazy Turk, or worse? I could not believe it had been that simple, that quick.

When I finally got off the metro (somewhere along Boulevard Raspail?), I looked up four different spellings of Durreck in the phonebook. There were several, but no "Markus." I began to dial the operator to ask her when I suddenly replaced the receiver in its cradle. Why was I so enthralled, so spellbound? I had met other characters before, in less likely circumstances. I had fallen prey to groups in cafes at night, and had gone to parties in a Fiat-load of strangers, and, as a salesman, I met people every day. What was so different? What was I doing? Why had this one man been so preternatural?

It was then that I realized I had missed my appointment. I phoned, apologized, and made another — for another day. I decided to take the day off and walk around the city. Maybe I had been working too hard. Although I had been in Paris almost a year by then, I had only seen the sights — *Tour Eiffel*, *Notre Dame*, *Arc de Triomphe* — from a bus or taxi window. The weather was nicely brisk for walking, overcast and damp, threatening snow. I ended up on a bench in *Le Jardin du Luxembourg* watching the children on their way home from *l'école*. The day had been wasted — a pleasantly spent afternoon.

I remember I had a dinner of onion soup at a small restaurant near my hotel, went back to my room, prepared documents for the next day's business, took a long and fairly warm bath, and went to bed early. I had tried to forget, for however momentarily, the morning's unusual *tete-a-tete*.

FOR THE NEXT WEEK OR SO I ANTICIPATED DURRECK'S reappearance. I scanned every metro station both coming and going; I scrutinized the mail carefully for a missive; I went to the door with each ring of the hall phone, listening for the inevitable "*un Monsieur Durreck*." But nothing came of it. After a few anxious days I began to inspect the crowd only when I remembered to. I tuned myself out of my surroundings and into my work. By the end of the second week after my weird encounter, I found myself chuckling softly during a cinema intermission at the absurdity of my apprehension. It had been, I concluded, a quirk, a misadventure. There was nothing to it at all.

Some days after I saw *Five Easy Pieces* with Jack Nicholson dubbed in French, I was consuming more onion soup at my favorite restaurant near my hotel when I felt a strange sensation — as if someone was reading my newsmagazine over my shoulder. I was sitting with my back to the window. When I turned and looked into the grey-light shadows of a city sunset, no one was there; but when I returned to my soup, Markus Durreck sat opposite at my table.

"Do you mind?" he asked.

Speechless, I wagged my head that I didn't.

"I have been out of town. Only tonight did I return. When I called at your hotel, the concierge told me that you generally eat here. You like the soup, yes?"

"Yes," I said. Recomposed somewhat, the spoon held tightly in my hand, I attempted to finish my supper. I didn't want to show him how much he unnerved me. Still, I was anxious to discover what he wanted. With my free left hand, I broke more bread crusts and let them fall into my bowl.

"It was business that took me away. Not oil though. Business that had to do with my hobby."

"Ears?" I guessed.

"Yes. There were — well — specimens that I had to examine in Africa. Turned out fine."

"Specimens?" I asked, wondering what exactly he meant.

"Photographs, advertisements, models, and the like. I collect ear . . . paraphernalia. *That is a good example.*" Durreck pointed to the newsmagazine that I had taken with me to the restaurant. On the

cover was a profile of Jackie Onassis. "Such a perfectly shaped ear — small lobes, clean lines, a wide inner concave, close forward ridges — very pretty, dainty, *royal*."

I looked closely, but I didn't see any great differences between Jackie's ear and anyone else's. Ears had always looked alike to me, the ones I noticed. Now, however, I began to look at Durreck more closely; his ears were large flabby things, wide from his head, elephantine, the lobes hanging loosely like warm dropping taffy.

"Women tend to have beautiful ears, especially American women, but it's not often that a man sees the hair cut short or tied back like so." He indicated the photograph. "Ears can tell you wonderful things about people — you'd be surprised."

I was surprised. I was also beginning to get upset. Was this some kind of an elaborate joke? What had all this blather to do with me? Why was I, of all people, chosen to endure this strange man's eccentricities? My soup was tepid; I could no longer hold my peace. "What do you want?" I said suddenly.

He seemed taken aback by my briskness, my directness. Perhaps my ears had given him a different image of my personality.

"Why nothing, if not friendship," he said in a higher tone of voice than he had previously used. "You see, I don't so very often meet such fine looking Americans. I don't get to practice my English as often as I want. One place I've never been, America. I'd like to know more about your country. Most Americans here — ah — writers, artists, dreamers — what do they know of America? They flee it like, how do you say, draft dodgers. You seem different."

For some reason, that was all it took. I felt more relaxed after the explanation. It was true, in a sense. Most of the Americans I had encountered in Paris were slovenly dressed, ill-kempt bohemians, college or exchange students. Very few American businessmen had overseas offices right in Paris — for one thing the city was too expensive. Brussels was preferred. In a way, Monsieur Durreck knew Americans pretty well; even I had gone to college in order to avoid the draft. I looked again at Durreck's spooky green eyes; they seemed honestly friendly and harmless, so I smiled. "I see," I said. At the time I thought I did.

He smiled now too — white as the dust from the men who had been sand-blasting the Arc de Triomphe — and gestured to the garcon for soup and beer.

WE BEGAN TO MEET REGULARLY AFTER THAT: once or twice a week for lunch or dinner or a stroll along the Seine. Every so often

Durreck would be gone for a couple weeks, then return. He never talked business, or politics, or economics. He often talked of art and aesthetics and, of course, ears. There was something unique and exciting about Durreck's ear fetish; it was as if his whole *raison d'être* impinged upon the existence of those appurtenances. He began to point out to me different kinds of ears, different shapes, sizes, colors, ears with hairs and without, mis-shaped or malformed ears, ears with animal-like characteristics. ("Perfect mouse ears!" he'd exclaim after a mousey young girl passed us on the sidewalk.) He'd point out diameters, distance from the skull, whether high or low on the head, ideal dimensions, and so forth. He mostly talked, and I, enthralled, listened, "all ears." I had to emulate a person who knew so much and who cared so much about ears.

Durreck was never depressed when we met, never appeared tired, it seemed. His enthusiasm for his hobby caught my interest and I too began to discern differences; I began to be able to say when we met: "Did you see the new cigarette ad on the billboard at so-and-so?" (To which he'd reply, "Ah, yes, yes." and nod eagerly.) We spoke in English — Durreck's command was superb — and I felt comfortable with him, even glad to see him after his trips out of town. He began to fill a void that I hadn't theretofore noticed — I was lonely and homesick.

After evenings of wine at a sidewalk cafe, or while walking in the early morning mist along the Seine opposite Notre Dame — all lit up and hunched like a cat about to pounce on the city — his conversations would take on poetic and mysterious airs. "As an armful of bouncing life," he'd say, "my only tether to the world was the dirt-brown swollen nipple of my mother's breast, beyond which, like an unreach-able heaven, the distant moon of her ear hung pale and precious in my sight. My mother had wonderful ears: brushed ever so gently by three wisps of curly auburn hair, they were semi-circular, almost perfectly geometric, lobe-free, and hairless — only with the light of perhaps a reading lamp or half-cracked door behind her did I detect hazily a fuzz of unspun cotton along the outer edges. My cheek burned nightly to feel that softness; my tongue, as I grew older, grew dry and tender at the quiver of the tip, those coffee-numbed buds of excite-ment, when I groped, caressed, flicked the near-perfect ears I so adored . . . every girl's ears, you see, became, for me, *her* ears. But they never really compared."

On these nights, I would be mesmerized by his monologue. Ears that I just took for granted as things a person had to wash behind became wonderful creations, precious works of art, freshly bloomed flowers.

Each pair was different, like fingerprints, each set somehow characteristic of the owner. I began to see, even when I was alone, not merely a different perspective, but a whole new way of looking at things. I began to notice people as I never had before: eyes, eyebrows, eyelashes, noses, nostrils, cheeks, lips, hair, hairlines, the direction of beard growth, fingers, fingernails, the color of the dirt beneath the fingernails, number of hairs on a thumb — and, wider, the whole world became alive — gutters, cigarette butts, shoelaces, weeds in the sidewalk, the directions of clouds, children's voices, worms in dog scat, corners of buildings most prone to settling dust, artist's signatures on billboards, publication data in books, watermarks on stationery

Durreck did wonderfully exotic things with a language unnaturally his, especially when he was inordinately moved by his topic. His English was marvelous. He poeticized: "My father's ears were grossly over-sized, the lobes the size of soup spoons, the rest red-pocked and brittle from working outdoors; they looked like a thick slice of salami. If you cut one off, it barely fits in a demi-litre jar. You can see who mine came from. When he grew old, a topography of dark rivers ran over the ears, up the mountains, into the valleys; the blue-black veins palpitated jungle-like rhythms. In his coffin, the ears were pale and white as fish, smooth as a well-honed sea pebble."

For months we met often at a predetermined location or at my hotel. For months I listened as Durreck talked fondly of his hobby. It wasn't, however, until the last week of my stay in Paris (I had been reassigned to Detroit) that Durreck asked me to visit his — and even now I cringe at the thought — "museum."

RETROSPECTIVELY, I SHOULD HAVE SUSPECTED that there was something unnatural about Durreck's obsession, but if I did, I didn't want to admit it. He was a boon companion to me, a bright light in an otherwise dismal and dark city. Although at times his talk was odd, it was conversation, and at that point in my life I needed conversation more than anything else. Before Durreck introduced himself at the metro, I had done anything to hear my native tongue spoken. I frequented dreary Latin Quarter bistros and cheap Left Bank cafeterias in order to sit near tables of American students, just for the babble. I even took weekend jaunts to London (though it wasn't the same English — not harsh enough, not bitter enough). I feasted on Durreck's poetry, even grew fond of him. Because of my increasing affection for Durreck, I almost regretted I had to leave Paris and return to the States, to Detroit. Then after I toured his ear collection, I wanted to leave as fast as I could.

Two other incidents should have warned me, when I think back on Durreck's odd behavior. At the time, however, I guess they didn't seem so unusual. One took place at a restaurant near Place Pigalle. We had been to look at some of the artist's galleries in Montmarte. Durreck suggested we eat at a little bistro where he knew a woman, a cook or something, from his native country (which, it occurs to me, I never learned). The food was pretty good, I remember. There had been some kind of lamb or veal with sauce wrapped in grape leaves or something. And excellent wine. After we ate, Durreck excused himself to talk to his friend and I was left to finish the wine. Fifteen or twenty minutes must have passed, so I decided I'd use the facilities before Durreck returned. As I was walking to the back of the restaurant, I noticed Durreck and a woman in the kitchen alone. I felt as though I had accidentally stumbled upon lovers in an alley or somewhere. Although I don't think they saw me, I felt embarrassed, uneasy. What unsettled me was the way Durreck was fondling the girl's ear: lovingly, tenderly, sensually, his fingers ran lightly around the edges. Her hair he held pulled back with his free hand. He touched her the way a normal man would fondle a young lover's breast or nipple, or like a father would trace the perfection in his sleeping daughter's features. I stood speechless, watching through the kitchen passageway.

When he leaned closer, his tongue reached out achingly (it seemed to me) and retraced his finger's path with its tip. As if a child savoring ice cream, it was a touch, purely and simply, of love. I turned away and quickly left the restaurant. I felt ashamed because I had seen what I had, and I was confused about that feeling. I felt the way a voyeur must feel: secretive, mysterious, aroused. The simplicity of his actions had been agonizingly beautiful — and, for some reason, that frightened me.

He came to my hotel the next day and apologised; he said he hadn't thought he had taken so long and that he didn't blame me for leaving. He never gave any indication whether he knew that I had seen. I accepted his apology and, until yesterday in the Near Water Cafe, forgot about that night.

THE OTHER INCIDENT I NOW RECALL should have flashed before my mind at his invitation like a warning light. It also meant very little to me at the time, but has since taken on new significance. Try as I might, I can't forget it. Even as I begin to write it down I'm as wet and as cold as the neighbor children who are playing in the sprinkler next door. A cold sweat . . .

Durreck rang me up long distance about a week after he left on one

of his "business" trips. He wanted me to meet him at the Gare de l'Est the following weekend — Friday, I think it was. When I did, he seemed extraordinarily exuberant, vibrant, chattering like the tunnel vendors I had left in the metro. He talked non-stop; about what exactly, I don't remember. He may have been telling me about an oil deal he had recently completed, or about the weather in whatever country he had just come from, or about the ear of some passenger on his train. I honestly don't remember. I do remember that he was loaded down like a pack animal with suitcases, attache cases, brown paper luncheon bags, string shopping bags (the kind so popular in Europe), packages and shoeboxes. And I remember he was in a hurry to get to his rooms. He had called me only to help him carry a couple suitcases home; he wouldn't let me assist with anything else.

As we went down into the metro, the crowd was jostling and rude. Markus was bumped several times, each time wrapping more of his arms about the packages. Then, just as we were boarding the train, something fell out of one of the bags. I retrieved it.

At the time, I wasn't really sure what it was exactly: it looked like a plastic sandwich bag, sealed, and it contained what looked like a greyish-white oyster or clam — just the fleshy part, with entrails sort of hanging loosely from it. When I picked it up, the bag was cold, as if it had been packed in ice (which, I came to understand, it had been). With the crowd pushing and jarring around us and the train about to leave, I merely picked it up and dropped it back into the open sack in Durreck's arms. He never said another word, and neither did I. When we reached his address, he excused himself, thanked me, and, in two trips, went up alone.

What had been in the bag, I realize now, was a human ear.

A WEEK BEFORE I WAS SCHEDULED TO FLY TO DETROIT, Markus Durreck invited me to his rooms. We had had dinner together (at my onion soup restaurant), taken a stroll to Notre Dame, and were having a *bier* at a small sidewalk cafe along Boulevard de Sebastopol when he asked me if I wished to see his collection.

"Your ear paraphernalia?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "I've been spending the past few weeks putting it into some semblance of order for you. That is why I never asked you before."

I imagine we had been discussing the waiter's ears prior to his invitation. I wasn't caught off guard or asked "out of the blue." In fact, I think I had been anticipating the invitation for some time. "Sure," I said.

He smiled — white as the snow on the French Alps — drank down his beer, and said ‘‘Voyons.’’

His building was just another dusty, grey-brown building along a street that runs parallel to Rue de la Paix. A short walk from the Louvre, it was probably three-quarters of the way north toward Avenue de l’Opera. There was an elevator, but we walked the four flights to his room. I was perspiring, I remember, because it was still warm for September. We had both dressed fairly heavily, anticipating a cool evening walk and the outdoor cafe. At his landing, Durreck inserted the key, threw open the door, and gestured for me to go in. Winded from the climb up the stairs, I took a couple deep breaths and, heart pounding wildly, I entered his room.

Pictures, illustrated pages, posters, photographs, drawings — all of ears — lay scattered, piled, stuffed, and dumped on the few pieces of furniture: a day bed along one wall, a table and two chairs against another, a set of book shelves against a third. The floor was cluttered with piles of cut-outs from magazines and newspapers. There were two-dimensional ears everywhere — ears of movie stars, ears of advertising models, ears of politicians, ears of novelists, ears of terrorists, ears of *animals*, even — all removed from their faces (which I assume had been discarded). There were ears of all shapes and sizes and colors, ears cut from comicbook heros and from political caricatures. On the bookshelves were three-dimensional ears — clay ears, plastic ears, white stone and ceramic ears that looked as if they had been broken from statues or off statuettes. There were tiny pale doll’s ears of assorted sizes, some as small as fingernails. In the corner under the table were dusty shoeboxes full of ears — removed from stuffed animals or plastic people — soldier’s ears, cowboy-and-Indian ears, Gendarme’s ears . . . It was an incredibly heart-slowing sight.

I MUST HAVE STOOD MOTIONLESS IN THE DOORWAY, barring Durreck from entering. After several timeless seconds, from over my shoulder he began to explain: ‘‘I was a lonely child, as you well know. I told you of my affection for mother — ah, the modern psychoanalysts, what do they know? I played much of the time alone, played spiteful, vengeful games, and learned to draw. My mother sent me here, to Paris, to art school when I was fifteen, many years ago. She sent me away from her.’’ He pushed me in gently, then stood surveying his prizes. It was more spectacular than I ever imagined it would be. Durreck turned slowly in the middle of the room, swept his arms in a gesture of blessing, the hands out in front, palms up. ‘‘It began with an exercise we were to do — draw the face of a model. As I drew, the

ear — a grossly misformed one it seems to me now — the ear became different, took on a new form, became the wing of an angel. I forgot the model, the paper, the charcoal, and concentrated solely upon the ear. It was so neglected, and so perfectly beautiful, that I wanted to scream." Durreck's hands fell to his sides and he shrugged. "From that point on I drew nothing but ears — a nude became an ear, a bowl of fruit became an ear, Venus de Milo became an ear. I was afflicted; I couldn't do my assignments. I was discharged from the school."

He paused, a pathetic creature of obsession in a world of his own — a strangely absurd, yet, it was beginning to seem to me, an oddly real world. My thoughts were asking "Why not? And why not?" and even as I couldn't answer, Markus Durreck turned away, unable to face me with his confession.

"I enrolled in the medical college," he continued, "took classes in physiology, studied the lungs, the bones, the heart, the muscles — all in order to reach the ear. When I did, *pure ecstasy!*" He moved toward a curtained closet or bath and stood before it. "We were assigned a body, a corpse, to study. I could get no further than the ear — mine was an old man, dead of influenza. Yet, his ears I thought were lovely, intact, smooth, hairless. I spent hours over the corpse, measuring, drawing, photographing. Again, I was hopelessly enthralled. There was not enough time for me to . . . we shared the corpses, were allotted only so much time. When another student discovered the disfigured body, they turned to me and I was released from the school."

"Disfigured?" I said.

He turned, smiled weakly, and drew aside the curtain with his right hand. "My *piece de resistance*," he said.

I SUCKED IN MY BREATH AND HELD IT. My heart began to pound like a jackhammer. There were maybe seven shelves at the back of the closet, and each shelf held a dozen or so pickle jars. Each pickle jar held, in formaldehyde or something, a human ear. Some were white and fat with age, some showed fresh pink clouds of dispersing blood, some were black, some were large, near the size of an open palm, some were small, child-like, toyish. I was dumbstruck.

Why show me? was the question in my mind. Oddly, I never once imagined it to be a dream, a nightmare; somehow I knew all along it was one of those stranger-than-fiction realities. My question was: *Why me?*

"Oil is only my hobby, if you must know," Durreck explained. "Ears are my business. After the Israeli-Arab conflict, I acquired new

specimens" — the word rang loudly in my memory — "from African problems, from unclaimed murders, from Vietnam — I have international connections. This is only a sampling of my collection. As a younger man I did the removals and preservation myself; now, I have a team of experts, and I pay them well."

"And me," I said, thinking I understood. "You want me to . . . ?"

"Oh no," he said, and laughed (somewhat nervously I thought). "No, no. I *have* people in America."

"Then *why*?"

We both were looking at the jars on the shelves in the pantry. Each one, as I looked closer, was labeled: sex, age of removal, nationality, specifications and dimensions, date of removal. "That one is my father's," Durreck said, pointing. He was tuned out to my questioning. I began to feel sick to my stomach and swallowed hard; the beer I had had tasted like old envelope glue. My mouth was as dry as my arms were wet with perspiration. I hadn't removed my jacket. "I had to work for that one," he said. "Timed it perfectly I thought — a few moments alone with my father after the casket was closed"

"Why?"

"I haven't yet found one like my mother's. It's a pity I didn't get hers. But I remember the perfection well. None, not one of these compares."

"Durreck! Damn it! Listen to me!" I screamed. "Why the hell . . . ?"

"I want your ear, Perry. It's the closest I've found — the most perfect ear. I want it, I *want* it." He was looking at me — over my shoulder — with the green spooky eyes. I backed up to the open door.

"Are you crazy?" I said, in a weak voice; then, louder. "Are you crazy?"

"You don't understand," he pleaded. "Only twice have I ever taken from the living — both times I paid handsomely. I will give you anything I can, *everything*."

"No one is going to cut off my ear," I said. I was indignant, though still frightened. The green eyes seemed to dilate and cloud, to gaze off into space.

"Money," he said. "Land, oil, *my soul*."

"No!" I was in the doorway.

"Sign a paper for after your death, *please*," he said. "Donate one to me."

"You're sick," I said, and, somewhat composed by my anger, I turned and began to descend the stairs. I didn't turn around or run; I just kept going down, down to the street and on to the metro. And back

to my room where I double-locked the door. I never saw Markus Durreck again.

FOR A WHILE AFTERWARDS, AFTER I RETURNED TO THE States (the next day), I replayed that scene in my head. On the way down the steps I may have heard a muffled cry: "Perry!" But I can't be sure. My head buzzed, pounded, I remember. For weeks, even safely hidden in Detroit with an unlisted telephone number, I didn't sleep. I expected to get on a bus across town and find Durreck in the seat next to mine. I scrutinized cab drivers carefully before I rode in their cabs. When a stranger eyed me too long, I moved quickly, left the restaurant or wherever, took a long and complicated detour home. I trusted no one, not even my new fellow employees (Durreck's connection?). I spent much of that year alone.

Once during that time I tried to contact the French authorities to — I don't know — have Durreck arrested or something. But the connections were bad, or they didn't have a Markus Durreck registered at the *Prefecture de Police*, or there was no such building on that side street. Or they couldn't help me because I had no real cause — no threats were made, no assaults. After several months, I began to think I was acting somewhat foolish. Nothing ever came of it. No one accosted me (no more, that is, than usual in Detroit). I relaxed and forgot.

I HAD FORGOTTEN UNTIL YESTERDAY, when in the Near Water Cafe I saw that earless man — that specter of my past. Most of last night, as I had many nights in 1974, I laid awake, or half-awake. I heard footsteps on the landing, car doors, whispering, footsteps on the roof. With cold sweat dripping into my ears, I heard my every swallow, and the cracking of my jaws. Even now, the buzzing noise has returned, and I feel my ear carefully with my fingers, each line, each hair, to be sure that it's still intact.

When I did sleep, I dreamt. I dreamt I held a razorblade, shiny and new, to someone's ear, and that I pulled it down ever so skillfully around the frontal lip and through, quickly and quietly. That there was no sound to it — a silent movie. The ear came off easily, cleanly cut, with just a trace of blood clinging like a ruby earring to the soft lobe. It fell into my cupped hand; it was almost weightless and still warm. It felt incredibly valuable and light.

When the head turned it was my mother's face, and I thought a voice not unlike Markus Durreck's began softly repeating, "That's a good boy, Perry. That's a good boy."

Stiff Competition

BOOK REVIEWS by JOHN BALL

After many months of waiting we have just received a copy of *Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers*, which was produced by St. Martin's Press under the editorship of John M. Riley. This is, in every sense of the word, a monumental work. It runs more than 1500 pages and contains encyclopedic information about more than 600 current-century crime writers in the English language. Two valuable appendices contain similar information on Nineteenth Century mystery authors and on those who have contributed to the literature in other languages.

This is a definitive work that is an absolute essential for any serious student or collector of mystery fiction. Each author is listed by name and pseudonyms, there is a bibliography of his or her work in the crime field, and an essay about each listed author by a contemporary expert qualified to pass judgment. From the time that this book came into the house it has been in constant use. Certainly no general library will want to be without it; Mr. Riley, in short, has achieved a triumph.

On one major point we must quibble. To this loyal and invested member of the Baker Street Irregulars, the omission of the name of John H. Watson M.D. is unpardonable, although much space is devoted to his literary agent, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

We don't know the price, but it doesn't matter. Get it.



Those talented ladies who write as Emma Lathen have done a new novel *Going For the Gold* which is based on the 1980 Winter Olympics at Lake Placid. When a world class ski jumper, and a strong candidate for the gold medal, is shot dead in mid-air, banker John Putnam Thatcher is called upon to deduct once more. There is a lively cast of athletes, coaches, bankers, and what all, and the action keeps up right to the finish when an unexpected killer is unmasked. All of the Lathen books are well written; this one has some sharp character delineation and there isn't a moment of boredom from beginning to end. (Simon and Schuster, \$11.95)



An excellent British police procedural is *Dark Blue & Dangerous*,

the work of Jonathan Ross who is himself a retired chief superintendent of police. He certainly knows his police work and how to extract the last drop of human reaction to all that goes on. When a handsome young constable is found under the water of a frozen canal, the subsequent investigation turns up the fact that he was a considerable womanizer, for which no one blames him too much, especially Superintendent George Rogers who does the detecting. The police interviews in this book are extraordinarily good and the people virtually leap out of the pages. An excellent piece of work by an exceptional author. (Scribners, \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

For more specialized taste is *A Treasury Alarm* by Jocelyn Davey. Our detective is Ambrose Usher of Oxford, who arrives in Boston to lecture and incidentally gather some information for Her Majesty's treasury. Soon he is involved with rich art collectors and the Irish mafia. The milieu is elevated and the book abounds in quotations in many languages. This is a scholar's book — one to be delighted in by those who inhabit the groves of academia, but a bit above the normal reader who hasn't troubled to keep up with his ancient Greek. (Walker, \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

For lighter reading, there is *The Grub-and-Stakers Move a Mountain* by Alisa Craig. The setting is a small Canadian village where archery is the thing and wherein resides a very successful lady novelist in the historical romantic tradition. There is a good deal of feminine chatter, some interesting goings on, and a dedicated campaign to defeat a land developer who is intent on taking over a piece of parkland for his own residence. Many arrows are shot and the lady novelist has the whole town talking in Elizabethian English when they forget themselves. An agreeable amusement. (Doubleday, Crime Club \$9.95)

☆ ☆ ☆

Also laid in Canada is *Dead Man's Tears* by Joel Newman. This is about Montreal private eye Philip Kaufman, who frequently brings up the fact that he is Jewish. There is a good measure of sex, some rewarding violence, some crooked cops, and also organized crime gets into the picture. The action moves right along, but not over any roads which have not been traveled before. This appears to be Mr. Kaufman's first appearance. We have no doubt that he will be along again with more of the same. Largely for private eye fans who have a new one here in a fresh setting. (Beaufort, \$12.95)

An excellent novel of true suspense is *Run, Sara, Run* by Anne Worboys. A talented and beautiful young actress, who has a child by her intended husband, has been ruthlessly persecuted anonymously for years. Everywhere she goes letters follow her, condemning her to those who are in a position to influence her career. The writing is excellent and the suspense builds splendidly. However, the ending is quite unclear. When the villain is finally unmasked it happens twice, and two different people appear to be the murderer. A careful re-reading of the last section did not clarify the problem. Apart from this, an outstanding book. If Miss Worboys reads this, we wish she would tell us who did what. (Scribner's, \$10.95)

* * *

For devotees of the supernatural, there is *Dark Flight* by John Rossiter (who is also Jonathan Ross, by the way). A world War II bomber pilot is shot down over Germany. When he apparently survives, he tries to escape the country. Meanwhile another pilot, of badly flawed character, is cutting a swath in England. When he too is shot down the two men meet under very unusual circumstances. This is a slower moving work that is to large extent an in-depth study of the second pilot whose gift for getting into trouble is unlimited. (Atheneum, \$9.95)

* * *

Clive Egleton, whose *Backfire* is well known, has returned with *The Eisenhower Deception*. This is a very involved book in which British agents try to prevent Ike's re-election to the presidency by providing faked evidence that he spent four nights with his wartime WAAC driver. Obviously the plot failed, but what if Ike had made such a minor slip, who would care? With all respect to Mrs. Eisenhower, the idea that a popular president would be defeated on such grounds is ludicrous, the grossly misnamed Moral Majority notwithstanding. (Atheneum, \$10.95)

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Paperback notes: One of Michael Gilbert's finest (and that is very good indeed) *Smallbone Deceased* is now available from Penguin for \$2.95. The wonderful stories about medieval Chinese magistrate/detective Judge Dee by the late Robert Van Gulik are reappearing in paperback as Scribner Crime Classics. Which indeed they are. So far available are *The Willow Pattern* and *The Emperor's Pearl*, both for \$2.50. If you have missed Judge Dee, here is your chance to rectify a major omission.

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